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INFINITE STRATOS

YUMIZURU Izuru
Illustration: CHOCO



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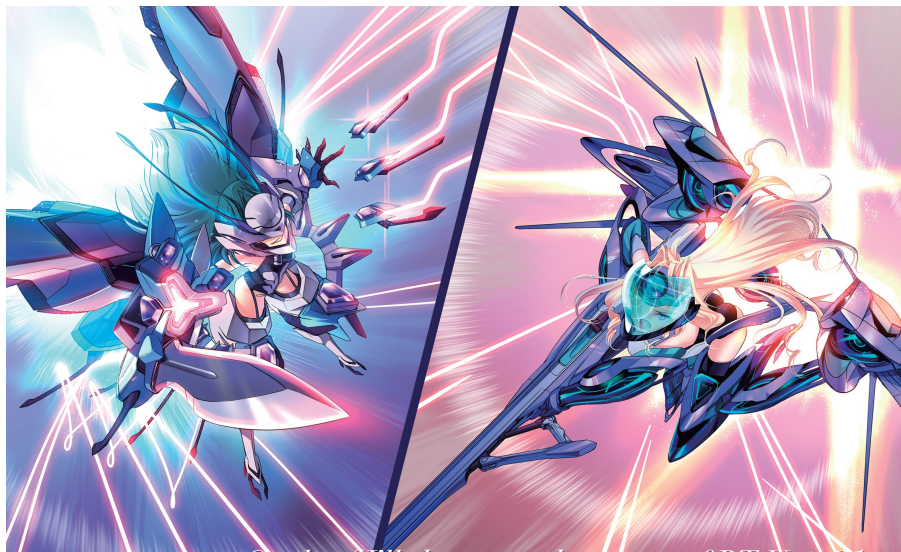
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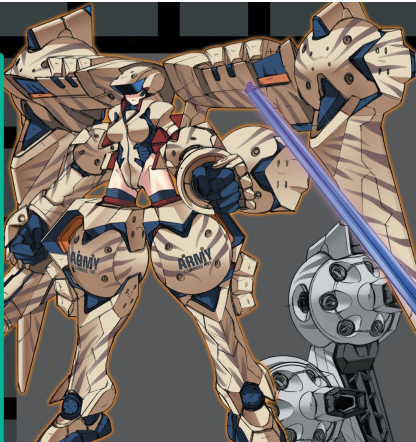
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*Cecilia: "I'll show you the power of BT Unit 01,
Blue Tears!"*



Built with a focus on leveraging existing know-how for reliability and functionality, the Fang Quake could be mistaken for a second-generation IS at first glance, but America is a global leader in IS technology, and the inner workings of its third-generation military IS reflect that fact. Intended for use on the emerging global battlefield, it features a modular design with field-swappable equipment and expansive hardpoints for mounting additional equipment without installation, making it a versatile fighter able to operate from the frontlines without dedicated engineering support. Along with four thrusters, it also features a revolver Ignition Boost. The tiger stripe camouflage shown is pilot Iris Galing's personal livery.

Japanese name:
"Shinga"
("Quaking Fang")
Model: FFF-02
Generation: Third
Country: America

Classification: Short-Range Melee IS
Equipment: Rydberg Matter Knuckle
Armor: Prototype Hardened Anti-Impact Armor
Features: Six-shot Revolving Booster

An IS captured from Great Britain by Phantom Task. The second in the series of Blue Tears prototypes, it builds on the data collected by the Blue Tears itself. Like Cocilia's IS, it mounts a BT system, but the addition of six Flexible Fire-capable offensive bits and two experimental beam-absorbing shield bits increase its capabilities significantly. Its thruster unit, in the shape of butterfly wings, allows for near-instantaneous rapid acceleration in any direction.



Japanese name:
"Eifuu" ("Sharp Wind")
Unit Code: BT-02
Generation: Third
Country: Britain

Classification: Strike and Away Assault IS
Equipment: "Starbreaker," BT Energy Rifle
"Energy Umbrella," Shield Bits
Miniaturized Gatling Laser
Knife
Armor: BT Energy-Reactive Armor (ver.2)
Features: Bits



M
Right



left, Tabane SHINONONO





Orimura Ichika

The only male in the world who can pilot an IS.
Personal IS: Byakushiki



Shinonono Houki

His childhood friend.
Personal IS: Akatsubaki



Cecilia Alcott

English national cadet
Personal IS: Blue Tears



Huang Lingyin

Chinese national cadet
Personal IS: Shenlong



Charlotte Dunois

French national cadet

Personal IS: Rafale Revive Custom II



Laura Bodewig

German national cadet

Personal IS: Schwarzer Regen



Sarashiki Tatenashi

IC Academy Student Council President

Personal IS: Mysterious Lady



Chapter I *The Silent*

Chapter II *Maidens, Sound Your Victory March*

Chapter III *Cannonball Fast*

Chapter IV *Heartbreaker*

Epilogue *Reflection in Water*

Chapter I: The Silent

Strategic Base #16, deep in the American northwest. Its nickname: 'Camp Erased.' Normally, its existence was kept so quiet that not even the average soldier had heard of it, but today it was enveloped in deafening gunfire.

"Intruder alert! Requesting reinforcements to sector 6-D! Repeat, intruder alert! Requesting reinforcements to sector 6-D!"

The rat-a-tat-tat of assault rifles. The shouts of brawny men. The rumbling cadence of combat boots on concrete. All this noise was directed at a single intruder.

A lone girl stalked down a metal catwalk. Yes, this was the intruder. She gazed at the men below, expressionless.

"Deploy..." As her voice rang out, she was bathed in a veil of light. It coalesced into solid matter, and in a few seconds, she was wrapped in vivid blue armor.

"An IS?!"

"This must be the tango they warned us about!"

The girl in the IS Silent Zephyrus—M—raised a gigantic rifle in her right hand. Designed to fire both kinetic ammunition and BT energy, it was named Starbreaker. Not that anyone there but her knew that.

"What are you even after?! Don't think you're gonna be able to run and hide from America after this!"

It was a question which expected no answer—but underneath M's visor-style hypersensor, she mouthed a few words. "Silverio Gospel. The IS you have here."

"What?!"

A blink of the eye later, they fell in a hail of her fire. Yet strangely, she wasn't just avoiding unnecessary deaths—she was avoiding killing at all. The bullets were 100% lethal, but she was aiming ever-so-precisely to wound rather than kill. *This 'no killing' thing is... so dull.* But her commander Squall had issued orders not to kill with an IS, and she had no choice but to obey.

No, It wasn't just obedience. M had been injected with monitoring nanomachines, and no more than a breath after she disobeyed orders, they would burn through her spine. This was another one of Squall's requirements, one which M had decided to endure for now.

"Ugh...!"

“Gah!”

“Dammit! HQ! Come in, HQ! We need backup! Repeat! We need—
ARGH!”

M, bored of precise aim, floated up into the air before diving forth and sweeping her foes to the ground. She followed the map of the base overlaid directly over her vision as it showed a route winding, descending into its depths.

As M entered an exceptionally large—the ceiling was at least five meters high—hallway, a shadow flitted across her sight. A woman, from her silhouette. Just as M began to relish the thought of cracking the woman’s ribs, an arrow of light pierced her right shoulder.

“Wh-What?!” As M instinctively grabbed the feather-shaped arrow to pull it out, it exploded in her hands. “Tch!”

The force of the explosion blew her toward the wall, and just before impact, she tumbled and fired her retro rocket. But in the half-second this took, she lost sight of her foe.

Bzzzt! Another bolt of light tore through a piece of her leg armor, blowing it off. Even M, well-practiced at speedy and precise maneuver, couldn’t manage to dodge. It ate at her confidence.

“You must be...”

“Natasha Fairs. US Army. IS test pilot. And the pilot of the Silverio Gospel.”

Natasha kept up her fire as she spoke. She cradled a gleaming silver weapon in her arms, its shape reminiscent of a pair of wings. It was the prototype hand cannon version of the Silver Bell. Its firepower was even higher than the final version, and Natasha was firing it on foot. Her silky blonde hair danced beautifully, tossed one way by recoil and blown the other by the shockwaves.

“I won’t let you have her!”

Natasha fought as fiercely as a mother protecting her brood. But still, she was only on foot. Once M regained her focus, she became unhittable.

“Ugh...”

“Out of my way.”

Stamping on the wing, M swiped broadly at Natasha with her right fist. Natasha was slammed back into the wall with a hollow thud.

“Is that all you’ve got?”

M reached down, grabbing the motionless Natasha by the back of the head, and lifted her into the air. On foot, Natasha was the taller woman, but M floated in midair. Natasha’s arms and legs dangled uselessly. Each was visibly broken in more than one place. There must have been even more fractures which couldn’t be seen. They hung lifelessly, like the branches of a willow. But—

“Ahahahah.” The passion in Natasha’s eyes burned without a flicker. “Hahaha.”

“What’s so funny?”

“Mission accomplished. Signing off.”

“.....?” Before M could understand what Natasha meant, the floor collapsed under her feet. “.....?!”

“Gimme Nat back— Phantom Task!”

A tiger-striped IS leapt out from the smoke, grabbing Natasha from M’s hands while plunging a throwing knife into the Silent Zephyrus’s armor. M may have been a steady-nerved veteran, but even still she instinctively dodged backwards.

“So that’s America’s new third-gen, Fang Quake.”

“Sure is. And I’m the National Cadet, Iris Calling... I’m gonna pay you back in spades for what you did to Nat.” As she spoke, she dropped Natasha to the floor to free up her hands for the fight.

“Hey, Eye.”

“What?”

“You know I’m hurt, right?”

“Oh, I know. Hold on a sec. I’m gonna give her a lot worse than what you got.”

“That’s not really what I meant by that...” As Natasha sighed, Iris glanced at her in confusion. It seemed like she honestly didn’t realize.

“Another new IS for us, then?” M slashed forth with a knife held dagger-grip as she spoke.

“Hey, hey, haven’t you ever watched a movie? You’re supposed to sit there and wait while the hero introduces herself... There!”

Iris caught the blade in her fist and wrenched it away from the Zephyrus with the sparks and groaning of twisting metal. Torn off, it spun up and embedded itself in the ceiling.

“I’m gonna warn you, I’m pretty tough. You ready for a beating you won’t remember? That thing you ripped off from the English isn’t much more than a testbed. It’s not gonna do you any good against me.”

Iris’s Fang Quake may have been a prototype too, but judging from its performance so far, it was one more along the lines of Shenlong: implementing stable, proven technology even better.

“M, can you hear me?” Squall’s voice came over a private channel. M was too focused on her foe to respond, but Squall saw no need to wait for one anyway. Her words were as sudden as her namesake storm. “Listen, I’ve been watching the situation, and I think it’s time to get out of there. We just got a hold of the Zephyrus, we don’t want to lose it again.”

M didn’t think she’d lose the fight, but she realized it would be a long one. And the longer it stretched on, the more likely it was that

other IS would arrive as reinforcements.

“Roger.” M replied emotionlessly.

“You’re not getting away!”

Iris gave chase with Ignition Boost. However, at the same time, M turned her thrusters around and also activated Ignition Boost, flying backwards.

“You’re a slick one.”

Iris almost admired the skill involved, but she didn’t have time to appreciate it. M was already accelerating away, firing as she flew backwards. She wormed her way nimbly through the twisting underground hallways, sending blasts of BT energy back as she fled.

“Hey, wait up!”

Iris gave chase, but was slowed by the need to dodge precise shots aimed at her IS’ joints. By the time there were only 100 meters left to the surface, M was already 50 ahead of her.

Dammit! If I don’t grab a hold of her now, she’s gonna get away! Iris focused, trying to pull off a revolver Ignition Boost with her four thrusters. It may have only had a 40% chance of succeeding, but she had a 0% chance of catching up otherwise. *Here goes!* M, realizing what Iris was about to try, deployed her bits for burst fire.

“GRAAAHH!”

The hail of fire washed over Iris, but she kept accelerating. No matter how much armor was blown off, no matter how much shield energy she lost, she wasn’t going to stop.

“Got you!”

Close up, Iris stretched out her arm. M was within her grasp— But just as she thought she was wrapping her fingers around M, they instead caught the energy umbrella of a shield bit. One packed with a special bonus load of high explosive.

“What?!”

The repulsion of the energy shield and shock of the explosion brought her from supersonic speed to a dead stop. Foiled, she was forced to let M go. As she broke out into the sunlight, all she could do was zoom in and watch Silent Zephyrus disappear behind a faraway cloud.

“Ahh— DAMMIT!”

She beat a fist into her palm in frustration. The metallic clang of Fang Quake’s armor striking together echoed across the landscape.



“What?! Your birthday’s this month, Ichika?!”

“Yeah.”

It was dinnertime in the dorms, and the usual suspects were quietly chatting around the table until Charl suddenly spoke up. I

wondered what was so surprising about that. I wouldn't have expected it to be so shocking that she'd spring out of her chair.

"What day?!"

"September 27th. I don't know what the big deal is, though."

"Hm..." Charl sat back down, then, suddenly said, "A Sunday?!"

She didn't quite spring up this time, but I could tell she was ready to. What had gotten into her?

"Yeah, I guess."

"I see... Mm, yeah, I guess. Yeah!"

As I confusedly watched Charl mumble to herself while nodding, Cecilia, who was next to me with a plate of beef bourguignon, set down her bread and began to talk, "Ichika, you simply must remember to give us proper warning in situations such as these."

"Huh? Oh, sure. Sorry." I apologized, not really knowing why.

"Very well, then. Sunday, 27th September."

Cecilia intently drew a star next to the date in her white leatherbound pocket organizer. Was it really that important?

"Why did you keep quiet about it?" Laura intoned ominously. She was sat next to Charl, so across the table and one seat to the right of me.

"Huh? It's no big deal, I'm not sure why I'd even mention it."

"Hmph. That explains you, but you're not the only one keeping it secret."

"**Ugh...**" Laura's glare turned to my two childhood friends, who stiffened in their seats.



Before we go any further, our dinners: Laura had a macaroni salad with seasonal vegetables, Houki had the sanma meal, and Rin had the mapo meal. And I had the savory omelet meal. It was one of my favorites, the broth used to cook it was fantastic.

“I wasn’t hiding it! You just never asked!”

“She’s right! How awkward would it be if I just started blabbing about it for no reason? Too awkward for me, that’s how awkward!”

Houki and Rin each continued scarfing down their rice as they spoke. They were definitely making excuses there...

“Anyway! September 27th! You’d better not make any plans, Ichika!”

“Ah, um, about that. I was going to get my friends from middle school together at my place. Why don’t you all come too?”

“Of course we will! What time?!”

“Around four, I guess? There’s that other thing on the same day, too.” As I spoke, everyone grimaced as if to say “oh, right.”

The ‘Cannonball Fast’ IS battle-race. It was originally an international tournament, but with IS Academy here, it would be a little different. The Academy’s students would be signing up for an event run by the city. Of course, those of us with personal IS would have a major advantage, so there would be separate divisions for us and for normal students in practice IS. And because it would be an off-school-grounds event using IS, it would be held in the city IS arena. It was this gigantic place down by the docks, with seating for over 20,000 people. One time, some idol group or something booked it and couldn’t even sell out, which pretty much put an end to concerts there. Of course... it was supposed to be just for IS to begin with, so...

“You know, now that I think of it, aren’t we supposed to be starting our high-mobility adjustments for the Cannonball Fast tomorrow? How exactly does that work, anyway?”

“Well, we’re by and large getting high-mobility packages installed, but Byakushiki doesn’t have one,” Laura began as she bit down on a cherry tomato.

“So you’re probably going to be tweaking your thrusters and reallocating energy output,” Charl followed up, nibbling on some fried fish.

“Hmm. Didn’t Cecilia’s IS have a high-mobility package?”

“Why, of course! My Blue Tears can be equipped with the Strike Gunner package, designed specifically for high-speed combat!”

Cecilia proudly tapped a fist to her chest. Her other hand was perched on her hip, in a pose which wouldn’t have looked out of place on a supermodel. *Looks like she’s finally out of her funk. I guess she got over whatever it was.*

Lately, she'd been practicing pretty intently after school. I hadn't really heard why, but it seemed like it had something to do with letting the enemy get away after the school festival. Laura wouldn't tell me anything about it either. Chifuyu had told her to keep her lips sealed. I guess what happened was even more serious than I had thought at the time.

'Phantom Task.' They'd been active for more than 50 years. From what little I could piece together from online rumors, they'd sprung out of the chaos of World War II. They weren't nationalists. They weren't radicals. They weren't fundamentalists. And they weren't racial supremacists. So what exactly they were after was a mystery. And the scale of their operations was just as mysterious. The name 'Phantom' really fit. At least according to Laura.

The two things we did know were that they were split into a strategic counsel and operational cells. And that lately, they'd primarily been targeting IS. Just what the heck are they? I'd heard the 'Remover' they'd used was a 'nonexistent weapon'—that is, something considered top secret. Yet somehow they'd managed to 'acquire' it somewhere and put it to use. *Phew. There's no real point worrying about it.* At least not right now. I turned my attention back to the Cannonball Fast.

"Good thing we've got you on our side, then, Cecilia. You'll have to teach me how to fly at supersonic speeds."

"I'm sorry... But not at the moment. Perhaps you could ask Laura?"

I noticed a frown flit across her face before she covered it with a smile. It seemed like she wanted to spend all the time she could on her own practice. Yeah, it was written all over her face.

"Oh? I see. Could you teach me, then, Laura?"

"Very well. You've been spending far too much time with that woman lately. Better for you to spend it with me."

'That woman' was, of course, IS Academy student council president Sarashiki Tatenashi. Tatenashi had finally moved out of my room in the past few days, but she was still drilling me hard after school every day. I'd been shaping up a bit, but it seems like Laura still barely trusted me with the safety off. She was definitely Chifuyu's student.

"You're the same, you know. Byakushiki's baseline specs are on a level with other IS' high-mobility loadouts... I guess the Akatsubaki's the same way too," mentioned Rin.

She really had a head for IS facts and figures. It was never her thing back in middle school, so she must have studied hard while she was back in China. *Yeah. Rin's pretty impressive.*

"Anyway, I don't know what the hell my country's doing. There's

no way they're gonna get Shenlong's high-mobility package here in time. What about you, Charlotte?"

"The Revive's a second-gen IS, so they're not developing it any further. But it supports auxiliary boosters. Really, it was always designed to be tweaked for speed. They didn't name it 'Rafale' for nothing."

Charl's IS, the Revive, was more properly called the 'Rafale Revive,' or 'Reborn Gust.' Yeah, that made sense.

"Mm-hm. How about you, Laura? Yours is third-gen, right?"

"They'll likely adapt the high-mobility pack from its sister IS, the Schwarzer Zweig. It's deployed in Germany, so most development takes place on it."

The conversation got a lot more serious as it turned to IS particulars.

"So Schwarzer Regen has a sister IS? What kind of weaponry does it have?"

"You may be my bride, but I still can't tell you. It's a national secret."

Zweig—That was German for 'branch.' Since it's paired with Laura's Regen, or 'rain,' it must also be an all-range IS equipped with an AIC.

"Nice grin on your face, rookie." Laura grinned back at me as she spoke.

"Thank you for the compliment, Major."

I was finally beginning to understand Laura's personality enough to play along with her jokes. Her frustration at the mention of Tatenashi was replaced with merriment—but deep in her eyes, there was still a chill. The Teutonic ice queen, Laura Bodewig. Her gaze was as beautifully clear, but just as piercing, as an icicle.

"Then it's time for our first real practice in a long time. We will commence at sixteen hundred hours in the second arena. Understood?"

"Ma'am! Yes, Ma'am. Don't expect this time to be so one-sided, though."

Laura giggled, "Perhaps. Or perhaps, tomorrow I may reveal the capabilities of my new equipment."

Laura turned her fork as she spoke. The prongs thrust through the pasta in her macaroni salad as precisely as pistons.

"Now, Ichika, I expect you to stay sharp during practice."

"I'll—"

"—You'll 'really use your noodle.'"

"...Is what you were about to say, right?"

"Please tell me you weren't going to say that."

Rin and Charl had both predicted what I was going to say at the

same time. Ugh...

“Hahaha, of course not.”

“Ichika, you...”

Ugh. Houki was glaring at me with baleful eyes. *No! It's not like that! It just sprang to mind! It's not my fault!*

“Well, that's enough about that idiot.”

That idiot? Really?

“Ichika, has the student council figured out how they're going to lend you out yet?”

“Me? I've heard they were doing a drawing, then tweaking the results.”

“Mm-hm...” Rin tried to pass it off as idle conversation, as she shoveled more chili oil-laden mapo tofu into her mouth.

“Actually, now that you mention it. All of you are in clubs now, right?”

I'd heard that recently, and this seemed like a good time to see if it was true.

“I've been in the kendo club since I got here.”

That was true if you counted ghost members, Houki. Though, lately you had been showing up more. I guess because of the captain's nudging during the school festival. Sometimes you sure are a handful.

“How about you, Rin?”

“Lacrosse.”

“Really? Lacrosse? Yeah, that definitely sounds like you.”

At least the ‘swinging sticks at people’ part. Though I wouldn't say that out loud even if you tried to carve it out of my mouth with a knife.

“I guess. I've been one of the rookies they have high hopes for since I started. Honestly, it's kind of a pain.”

There seemed to be a clear line between the physical capabilities of those with and without personal IS. I nodded as I imagined Rin racing down the field.

“What about you, Charl?”

“Eh, me?!”

“Yeah. What club did you join?”

“Well, umm...”

“Huh?”

Charl twiddled her fingers, as if she was having a hard time saying it. She kept looking between me and the table, as if unsure how I'd react.

“Um... the cooking club.”

“The cooking club? Oh, right, we went there together during the festival!”

“Ahh, Ichika! Sssh! Sssshhhh!”

Hm? Why was Charl trying to shush me? For some reason, I felt like I could hear people standing up from the table in the back.

"The cooking club, huh..."

"M-Mhm. I wanted to learn how to cook Japanese food."

"I see. When you learn, I'd love to try whatever you make."

"Oh, sure! Of course!" Charl nodded as she spoke intently. It's hard to believe she was the same girl who was just shushing me.

"How about you, Cecilia?"

"I've chosen a proper English sport: Tennis."

"Oh, I see. Did you play back at home in England?"

"Indeed I did. Care to join me for a match sometime?"

"I've never played tennis."

"Then—" Cecilia suddenly sat stock straight with her arms crossed. "Why, I could give you lessons! As a special favor, of course."

"Sounds great. I'm looking forward to it."

"Of course!"

The smile on Cecilia's face relieved me. Lately, she'd been closing herself off a lot, but if she could smile like that, then there probably wasn't anything to worry about.

"Oh, and I've joined the tea ceremony club." That was Laura, who seemed to have just finished her pasta.

"The tea ceremony club, huh. You're really into Japanese culture, aren't you. Wait... Isn't that the club my—"

"*Mein Lehrerin*—that is, Ms. Orimura is the club advisor, yes."

I'd heard about that before. They say she weeds out her fangirls with two hours of kneeling. Really, though. Chifuyu and the tea ceremony club was an interesting combination. I always thought she'd end up involved with a sports team.

"Are you fine kneeling, Laura?"

"Of course. Compared to torture, it's hardly anything."

I'm not sure I was comfortable with that comparison. And wait, just what kind of torture was she subjected to?

"You know, I can't even imagine what you'd look like in a kimono. You'll have to show me sometime."

"R-Really? I suppose... Very well. If there's a good opportunity."

If Laura was to wear a kimono, she'd probably tie her hair up. And it'd probably look really good on her.

"Perhaps I should own one, anyway. Maybe I'll buy one later."

"Eh? Just because I mentioned it?"

"Don't think too hard about it. I'm sure I'll have many opportunities to wear it."

"R-Right. I see. Yeah... it'd be great around New Year's. But aren't you heading home for the holidays?"

"N-No. I'm going to stay in Japan... After all, you're here..."

I couldn't quite make out what she said at the end, but it seemed like Laura would be in Japan for the holidays.

"We should all go together, really. Maybe make it there for the bell-ringing, so we can enjoy the whole thing."

The more of us there were, the more fun it would be.

"Wait, what are you all doing for the holidays? I guess most of you are going home?"

"I'm staying here," said Charl. She was definitely becoming close friends with Laura.

"Then I shall remain as well!"

"Not like anything fun's gonna happen in China."

Cecilia, then Rin. That left just Houki—no, wait, I just realized.

"Houki, will you be helping out at the shrine? I know you did over summer break. Once you're done, why don't we pick up where we left off—"

"You idiot!"

Houki gave me a good hard smack.

"Ouch! What'd you do that for?!"

"Seriously, stop it! Don't just let that drop!"

"What do you mean, 'pick up where you left off'?"

That was Rin, Cecilia, Charl, Laura... That was everyone but Houki!

"Ichika! Just what did you do over summer break?!"

"Why, Ichika! I'm so very disappointed in you!"

"I-Ichika? What exactly did you leave off?"

"Sneaking off like that... Unforgivable."

The four stood up in unison.

"Wait! Wait, I can explain! We didn't do anything we're not comfortable mentioning! Right, Houki? Right?"

"Why do you have to deny it that hard..."

"Eh?"

Smack! Right on the head.

"Hmph!" Houki, finished with her meal, left, taking her tray with her.

Hey, wait! Don't just throw me to the wolves!

"Ah, anyway, I'm done, so I'm going to head back to my— Bwah!"

Just as I was standing up, Rin grabbed me and stuffed me back into my seat. I was surrounded before I could even say "oww."

"Ichika! I want to know what you did last summer!"

"I demand an explanation!"

"No fair playing favorites, Ichika."

"It seems like you need a more concrete lesson."

W-Wait! Just wait! Wa— NOOOOO!



Hmph. Ichika's such an idiot. Houki closed the door to her room behind her, before slumping backward onto it. Luckily, her roommate, Takatsuki Shizune, was still out, so she was able to take a breather.

"Once you're done, why don't we pick up where we left off—"

She thought back to Ichika's words. **Ba-dum.** Her chest pounded. Just thinking about what happened that summer was enough to make her heart throb. As her pulse began to race, her face flushed red.

I haven't been practicing enough... Pressing her hands to her burning cheeks, Houki ran through the stances of Shinonono-school martial arts. She told herself 'calm down, calm down' over and over as images of the motions filled her mind, and compared her own movements to those memories. *That's it. The steps are quicker, the footwork is more complex...* Her father, when he gripped live steel, was so vigorous, so forceful. He moved like flowing water, but with a precise sharpness. *He's wonderful.*

Houki's goal was to be like her father and teacher, Shinonono Ryuuin. She had a genuine admiration for his abilities. And, thinking of it, he was a man who was fazed by nothing. Definitely different from Ichika in that way. *That's right! Men should be unflappable!* As her mind drifted, the man in her mental images changed from her father to Ichika. But this Ichika was different. He was vigorous, forceful, resourceful, and keen. Self-confident. Magnanimous.

"N-No! No! That can't be him! He's not like that at all!" Houki shook her head with such energy that her ponytail bounced like the tail of a horse at full gallop.

"Shinonono... if you don't move, I can't get in."

"Wha—"

Startled by the voice from outside the door, Houki sprung forward, moving her weight off it.

"There we go."

"Sorry..."

"It's fine. Don't worry about it." Shizune smiled and settled down on her bed with a paperback. The title was 'Way of the Warrior.' But the entire thing was an American-style parody. Shizune may have seemed super-serious, but she loved trashy—in a good way—comedies. If you asked her, she'd say they took away her worries.

"By the way, Shinonono."

"W-What?"

"Another complaint. You girls with your own IS are still hogging Orimura."

"It's not like I can do anything about it myself."

"Isn't the thing where he's lent out to clubs going to start soon,

though?”

Recently it had been announced that Ichika, although joining the executive branch of the student council, would be lent out to other clubs to help with whatever needed doing. There were a number of objections that perhaps this ordeal should be settled with IS, but student council president Sarashiki Tatenashi sat everyone back down with the Faustian bargain of ‘Don’t worry. The most cooperative clubs will get priority.’

Jeez, he’s just so... so... Still, though, Houki was a member of the Kendo club. The prospect of Ichika coming to practices pleased her. I’m sure that if he sees me, even Ichika will realize— She shook her head again to snap herself out of it. *No, that’s not it! It’s not like that, just... It’s kinda like that.* It was an excuse made to no one in particular, but Houki still felt a little guilty about it. *Ugh... It’s really not really like that, though! I would never be so fickle as to—*

“Shinonono?”

“Y-Yes?!”

“Are you okay? You seem really worried about something.”

“I— No. I’m fine.”

“Oh.”

Shizune turned back to her book. To Houki, Shizune’s blasé reaction only highlighted her own awkwardness even more, and she sunk into deep embarrassment. *It’s Ichika’s fault... This is all Ichika’s fault...* She was just lashing out in anger, but it still consumed her until she finally fell asleep.



“Ugh... They chewed me up and spit me out...”

After finally being released from my interrogation, I wandered back to my room in a daze.

“Welcome back. I thought I’d just drop in.”

“Tatenashi...” I slumped in resignation.

Sarashiki Tatenashi. IS Academy’s student council president. The strongest student in the school. A year older than me.

Her personality is... Maybe you’d say ‘uninhibited,’ maybe you’d say she’s a ‘free spirit,’ maybe you’d just say she’s like a cat. She must be quite accustomed to just opening up my room and walking in, as she was sprawled out on the bed reading a fashion magazine.



“.....”

“What’s up? Oh, are you trying to peek at my panties?”

“U-Um, could you not kick your legs up like that when you’re wearing a skirt? I don’t even get to choose whether I want to or not!”

“Mm-hm. So you saw them?”

“Well...”

“Question, then. What color were they?”

“They... were pink.”

“Oh dear. You’re such a pervert.”

Ugh, what was with her?! Was she just here to make fun of me? Every time she came to my room it was like this.

“Anyway, there’s something I wanted to talk with you about today.”

“What.”

“Don’t be so standoffish. This is serious. It’s about that organization.”

‘That organization’ could only mean one thing: Phantom Task. I suddenly snapped back to attention.

“This is all unofficial, but they just attacked an American IS base. Their target seems to have been the IS itself. You should make sure they don’t manage to get yours.”

“Of course. I don’t plan on falling for the same trick again.”

“Excellent. I like a man who learns his lesson— Now, will you keep learning them until I’m absolutely fascinated with you?”

That’s... a pretty high hurdle, but she must have high standards, with a family like hers. I couldn’t even imagine what the ideal man for her would look like. And what kind of person will she end up with?

“Oh, are you worried about me? Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. After all, women have their needs too. I’m sure I’ll find someone.”

“Uhh...”

“Maybe it will even be you, Ichika.”

“Ahaha...” That joke again. I squeezed out a dry chuckle.

“I can’t believe you. That honestly hurt.”

“Well, just, uh...”

“Children who say that kind of thing need a good tickling.”

“Please no. That really wasn’t fun.”

It didn’t help that, while she was tickling me, her voluptuous chest and soft thighs were pressed up against me. In fact, it was dangerous. In more ways than one.

“I think it’s time for what your body craves, Ichika.”

Tatenashi closed in on me, her fingers grasping. Oh no! If I didn’t get out of there, I— ***Knock, knock.***

“Ichika, do you have a minute?”

The sudden knock was followed up with Charl's voice. *I'm saved!*

"Sure! Just a sec, I'll get the door!"

This was my way out of Tatenashi's tickle torture! I was practically pumping my arms in the air as I walked to the door.

"Sorry to bother you."

"Come on in!"

"Eh?" Charl suddenly froze as she saw Tatenashi's smile. Her expression stiffened from surprise to a terrifying blankness.

"Ichika, what were you two doing?"

"Oh? Nothing, just chatting."

"Hmm... Then why'd you say I could come in?"

"Why'd— Huh? Charl, are you mad about something?"

"Why would you think that? Of course I'm not. I'm not mad at all."

Whoa! I could practically see her veins bulging in anger and flames dancing behind her! *Why? Why, Charl?!*

"I'll be leaving now. Take all the time in the world, Charlotte."

"Understood."

So what, she shows up to make a mess and then runs away? What was she, some kind of one-woman guerrilla army? Ah well. Life isn't fair. Tatenashi, having made things awkward, made her way out.

"Um..."

"....."

A sudden silence fell over us.

"Uh, anyway, why not have a seat? Shall I make some tea?"

"Oh, thanks. I'm fine on the tea, though."

"Okay."

I sat on my bed with nothing to do to take the awkwardness away. For once, Charl sat next to me rather than across from me.

"Er, um..."

"What?"

"Oh, uh, it's nothing." Charl's voice from close to the side was clear and bright. If a voice could do damage, I'd have been peppered with holes. I guess. Anyway, even though I didn't have anything to be guilty about or anything, the silence was still weighing on me. It was like being on pins and needles. *Ugh...*

"Pff—" Charl suddenly tried to hold back a chuckle. "Ahahah. Really, Ichika, I'm not mad. You don't have to be so nervous."

"Oh? Uh... Really?"

"You're squirming like a guy who just got walked in on cheating. It's hilarious, hahaha."

Her smile was pure, without a hint of suspicion. It seemed like she really wasn't angry.

"Anyway, uh. What were you mad about before?"

"You're getting way too friendly with Tatenashi."

"Huh? I don't think so. Isn't she friends with everyone?"

"...That wasn't what I meant."

Huh? What was that? Charl had whispered something, but I couldn't quite make it out.

"Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about something." Charl had suddenly gotten very fidgety and was fiddling her fingers as she glanced at me sideways. "Um, well. You know how you got me this bracelet? I... I wanted to return the favor, and get you something to wear for your birthday. What do you think?"

She seemed really on edge as she started talking, but by the time she finished she was leaning close in and speaking intently.

"Oh, the bracelet from this summer? Well..." I rolled up my sleeve and showed her my right arm. On it was a gauntlet, my IS Byakushiki in standby mode. "I kind of have this."

"We-Well!" She leaned in closer. "How about a watch? I'm sure that would come in handy!"

As she spoke, she pulled up her own left sleeve, revealing a women's watch that was both delicate and cute.

"Huh. That's a nice watch."

"Isn't it? And they make a men's design, so we could have matching—"

"But I don't really use watches. I just pull out my phone."

"....."

That's funny. I could see her grimace as she tried to keep up her smile. Why, though?

"Ichika, if you want to look sharp, you need a watch."

"Uh. If you put it that way..."

It didn't seem like I had the option of disagreeing. But why?

"Anyway, why don't we go shopping downtown this weekend? I wanted to look at the clothes anyway."

"I guess. Why don't we?"

"Really?! You promise? Promise me you will!" Charl held out her pinky. Ever since she'd learned that pinky swears were originally a Japanese thing, Charl had been a little bit fixated on them. I had no reason not to go along with it, so it ended up being a regular thing between us.

"Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a cluster bomb in your eye."

Her... unique interpretation of the words was always a bit terrifying. Charl would definitely be the scariest of them all if you made her mad.

"It's sealed, then."

"Yeah."

Charl giggled and said, “I’m looking forward to next weekend.” It was still only Monday, so that was a good long way away.

“I! Chi! Ka! You awake? I know you’re awake in there! This weekend, can we—”

My door flew open with a bang, revealing Rin. As she saw how close Charl and I were sitting, her lips twisted.

“...What are you two doing?”

“She wanted to pinky—”

“ICHIKA!”

Charl, flustered, covered my mouth. But it wasn’t enough to conceal my words from Rin, and her eyes gleamed.

“A pinky swear, huh? So what did you promise her? Huh? Cough it up!”

“We were going to go shopping this weekend...”

“Hmph! Ichika, you idiot!”

Ugh, she was mad. Charl spun away with an ‘I don’t even know you anymore!’ Why? Shopping’s more fun in a bigger group.

“Oh really now? I guess I’ll join in, too. See you this weekend, Charlotte!”

“Oh, I guess...”

Rin was grinning like a cat who’d stolen the dinner fish, while Charl was pouting. I... I didn’t think Charl hated Rin, did she?

“All three of us, then.”

Rin smirked and replied, “I guess. What time should we meet up?”

“Ten, at the statue in front of the station?” Charl suggested it without changing her expression. If she kept pouting like that, I was going to have to poke her cheek.

“Charl.”

“What?”

Poke.

Poke, poke.



“.....”

“.....”

“Ahh...” Rin shrugged in exasperation.

“Ichika, you idiot!” Charl stalked out of my room, slamming the door behind her.

“Ichika, man. You really—”

“Please don’t say it.”

“You really are an idiot.”

Well, excuse me.



Oh, oh wow... Charlotte hid her face with her hands as she rushed back to her room. Her cheeks were already glowing pink and beginning to heat up. Ichika just... He just reached out and touched me... Ahh... If I'd just had a little longer to get ready for it, I never would have run out of the room like that...

Really, she was still frustrated that he'd joked about her being angry rather than showing a little empathy. But she was a 15-year-old in love. The pounding in her chest from her crush touching her cheeks was far more intense than any frustration.

Ahhh... After glancing around to make sure no one was watching, she slowly, hesitantly ran a finger over where Ichika had touched. Now that the spark in her heart was lit, Charlotte couldn't stop her face from flushing a deep red.

If Ling hadn't have shown up then, we could have gone on a date... I wish he had turned her down. Ah well, what's done is done.

She knew that Ichika wasn't the type to play favorites, but still... Still, she wished it would happen. *Just once, I wish he would treat me special...* Adorable selfishness like that is the privilege of a girl in love.

“Phew...” Charlotte had arrived at her door, and let out a deep sigh as she pushed it open.

“Ciao!”

“Charlotte. Help me get her out of here.”

Charlotte had to hold back a ‘whoa.’ Laura and Tatenashi were at each other's throats—or at least Laura was at Tatenashi's. If she had been a cat, her hair would have been standing on end and her tail would have shot straight up like an antenna. Her eye was squinted even 60% more than usual.

“You know, they say that each time you let a sigh go it takes a little bit of happiness away with it.”

“Er, uh, sure, I guess. I'll be careful about that.”

“Charlotte! Tell me how to get rid of her!”

“Uh... Laura... I can't really...” Good-natured Charlotte was caught

between a rock and a hard place. She could practically hear her happiness sprinting away.

“C’mon, Laurie! Can’t we be friends?”

“D-Don’t call me Laurie! And I have no reason to be your friend!”

“Oh really? Well then I’m just going to have to—”

“What?! Wait, no, not *that*!” Laura’s expression twisted into wide-eyed terror.

As Charlotte wondered what was going on, Tatenashi approached Laura with palms stretched and fingers grasping. *Oh, right, Laura’s ticklish.* Tickling. Being able to force others to smile was the secret to Tatenashi’s success... No, it was her favorite hobby.

“No! No, stop! You idiot! I-I’m really gonna fight back!”

“Fufufu. And how long will you be able to keep that up?”

“Stay back! I’m serious! I’ll cut you!” Laura has already unsheathed her tactical knife, but her right eye quivered with a mixture of unsettledness and fright.

“You’ll need more than a knife to keep me away!”

“Dammit... If I just had a gun, you’d be...”

“Making pupusas on the battlefield is a good way to get yourself killed.”

She was punning on ‘excuses’ for some reason. Probably. At least, that’s all Charlotte could even imagine to guess.

Well, this should be over soon. I should make some cocoa. Charlotte had recently learned that a nice hot mug of cocoa was the easiest way to calm Laura down. Make it nice and thick, and no matter how hard she complained Laura would furtively sip it down like a squirrel at a birdfeeder.

“It’s showtime!”

“Ah, wait... WAAAAAAAAAH!”

It goes without saying that soon, the room was filled with Laura’s strained laughter.



“Ugh, I can’t believe you! Why didn’t you help me?! How could you abandon a comrade like that? You must have gone mad! We do things differently in my squad. It doesn’t matter how bleak the situation looks. We never abandon our allies. That strategy is what lets us operate as a cohesive unit. That’s what makes us one. In the first place—” Laura sipped the cocoa Charlotte had made while complaining to her.

“Are you even listening to me?!” After a large gulp, she sounded off. But Charlotte was used to this sort of behavior, and simply nodded along while combing Laura’s hair.

“Laura, what do you think of the new shampoo?”

“Hmm? Well, I don’t dislike the smell.”

“I see. That’s good. I’d never bought you a lavender one before, so I was worried about what to do if you didn’t like it.”

“Well... I mean, I don’t love it either. I just don’t dislike it.” Laura was always especially talkative after a tickling from Tatenashi. And lately, when Charlotte combed her hair, she half-closed her eyes like a satisfied cat. It seemed like it felt so good she was almost falling asleep during it. “Ahh...”

Sure enough, Laura let out a small yawn, almost hypnotized by the rhythmic motion. The cat-eared pajamas she was wearing seemed to have become part of her bedtime ritual.

“Shall we go to sleep, Laura?”

“Mm... I suppose...” Laura responded languidly, with a nod, then took another small sip of cocoa. Her behavior made her seem even more a kitten, to the point where Charlotte was almost inclined to hug her.

“Remember to brush your teeth.”

“I know...”

Laura, already half in her dreams, finished her cocoa in a single chug, then left for the bathroom. Three minutes later, she returned and tumbled straight into bed, squirming her way under her blanket.

“I’m turning off the lights. Good night, Laura.”

“Mhm.”

In no time at all, her breath turned steady. Charlotte, hearing her roommate sleep, let out a sigh of relief. *I guess going as three will be fun...* Her thoughts turned back to the weekend shopping trip. Turning her eyes to the bracelet on her left wrist, which glimmered in the darkness, Charlotte began her own bedtime ritual.

Good night, Ichika... She kissed it lightly, before burying her own face in her blanket as if to hide her blush.

Chapter II: Maidens, Sound Your Victory March

“Mm-hmm-hmm~♪”

Ling’s roommate, Tina, muttered “This again?” to herself as she watched Ling be in entirely too good of a mood for what time it was. In her hands was a cup of high-quality—and high-calorie—ice cream. *Charlotte will be there, but whatever. That doesn’t matter. I’m going shopping with Ichika. And that’s a date, right? A date!* In her own mind, she was the center of the universe. Another privilege of a girl in love.

“All right, that one!” Ling had finally picked out which outfit to wear, and after pointing to it quickly began to dress. Tina, meanwhile, had gotten bored of watching her and turned her attention back to the morning talk show on a floating projection display.

“All right, here I go!”

“Of course. Have fun.”

A second after the door slammed shut behind Ling, she sighed at who awaited her in the hall.

“Good morning, Cadet Huang Lingyin.”

“Good morning...”

The woman was in her late twenties. Her narrow eyes sat behind a pair of thick-rimmed glasses, and she wore a form-fitting suit. She could easily be mistaken for Chifuyu by description alone, but one thing set them apart: her perpetually irritated expression.

“Why, whatever could it be, Director Yang?”

Ling could feel a foreboding tremor run up her spine. *I thought she was back in China! What’s she doing in Japan?!*

Making that foreboding a reality, Director of Cadets Yang Lei-Lei pushed her glasses up with her right hand and replied, “The ‘Feng’ high-mobility package for Cannonball Fast is ready. We’d like to begin setup, install, and initial trials as soon as possible. Get ready.”

“What? No way! Uh, I mean, I had already made plans for today, so...”

Yang’s gaze narrowed and muttered, “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“U-Understood...”

Ling’s shoulders slumped as she quickly punched a text into her phone. *[Sorry, something came up.]* That was all she wrote—all she could bring herself to write—to Ichika.

“...Is the impact cannon still available with it installed?”

“The output power has been reduced, and its pattern changed to a short-range spray, but it is still usable. The auxiliary thrusters are the new kind, so you’ll need to get used to their feel.”

“Understood.”

For everything else she was, Ling was definitely also a national cadet, and when she had to switch modes she could in a snap. As they set off for the IS setup room, Ling checked over the package’s data, occasionally questioning Yang about details.

Hmm... This honestly isn’t half bad. Ling had a keen eye for details about IS. Her eyes gleamed like those of a cat. *But... I really got screwed here, didn’t I.*

Ichika was still going shopping. Meaning, he’d be alone with Charlotte. *Ugh! We’re definitely going to make up for this, Ichika!* Ling gripped her IS computer so tightly that it only took two seconds for it to display a high-pressure warning.



Does my hair look right? I should probably check it again. Charlotte, who had made it to where she was meeting the others 45 minutes early, anxiously checked her hair for the twelfth time. In her hand was a Wajima lacquerware folding compact, which she had ordered online on a whim a few days prior. Its design was susuki grass on a hill in front of a full moon, perfect for the season.

“Mmn...” As she teased her bangs from side to side, she groaned quietly to herself.

I just can’t decide... Neither way was noticeably better or worse, but for Charlotte, today was a special day. She wanted to be at 100% for the boy she liked. It was only natural. *I really did get here too early, though.*

Putting away her compact, she checked the watch on her right wrist. Still 40 minutes left. *Phew... I’m taking this way too seriously. I need to relax.* She practiced her smile. Unluckily for her, she looked up with an expecting grin only to make eye contact with a pair of shifty-looking playboys.

“Hey there, sweet cheeks!”

“What you doin’ today? Huh? Wanna go have some fun?”

With most countries moving toward women’s superiority, the position of men had taken quite the tumble. But that just meant that those with the right looks—the kind of man who would have been a host or an idol in the past—were even more drawn to the idea of latching on to someone. Meaning that this sort of catcalling pretty girls in the vain, in more ways than one, hopes that it would pay off still happened.

“Sorry, I have plans.”

“Really? C’mon, it’ll be fun.”

“My car’s right over there. We can go anywhere in the world! Come on, I’ll tell you all about French cars while we drive.”

French—was enough to set Charlotte off.

“French cars? You drive something with mileage that bad in Japan? Seriously?”

The duo, shot down with a venom-laced smile, wilted. If they pushed it any further, Charlotte’s mastery of the Rapid Switch meant she could fill them both with lead in under a second.

Ugh, they’re ruining my morning... She imagined at least five ways she could do it. The grin this brought to her face just convinced them they had a chance, though, and one of the men moved to clasp his hand on her shoulder.

“Ow! Ow! Oww!”

The moment before he made contact, Charlotte turned and twisted his arm like a pretzel. She definitely remembered the basics of CQC.

“Can you keep your hands off? I don’t want the reek of that cheap cologne to rub off on me.”

“Wh-Wh-What?!”

“Hey! Let him—”

The second man was confused but still about to help his buddy—until he was felled mid-sentence by a punch to the side.

“And what are you doing to my companion?”

“Ichika!” Ichika had gallantly appeared to protect her from the evildoers! ...Was probably overstating it, but certainly, Ichika’s smile was positively glimmering in Charlotte’s eyes. *Amazing! He’s like a fairytale prince!* Charlotte was so enraptured that she didn’t notice she was still twisting the man’s arm.

“Gyaaah!”

The satisfying crunch of something dislocating and the man’s screams echoed through the plaza in front of the station.



“Getting that pushy with women is a crime, you know. C’mon, right this way. Atta-boy.”

The middle-aged sergeant’s words were oddly out of place with his tone as he led the two men to the holding room in the train station. Thus, the morning’s festivities concluded.

“.....”

“Ichika?”

“I’m so sorry I was late!” I clapped my hands together apologetically. Charl was puzzled by it.

“Well... You’re still here early, right? Thanks for saving me, too.”

“Who wouldn’t?”

She seemed really grateful to me, in her own modest, reserved way. Honestly, it was a little embarrassing to be thanked so much. Anyone would help their friend in a situation like that.

“.....”

“.....”

Sure enough, we’d run out of things to talk about. Charl had worked up a sweat with the judo or whatever she did earlier, and was fanning herself with her palm.

“Ling’s pretty late, though.”

“Oh! Right! Rin isn’t coming today. Something came up.”

“EHH?!”

Charl’s sudden exclamation drew the attention of people around us. It was a sunny Sunday, and we were by the statue in front of the station. So plenty of people were around waiting for others.

“So today it’s just the two—”

“What do I do?!”

“Huh?”

“Just... It’s so sudden, I’m not ready...”

“Ready? Huh?”

“Anyway! What do I do?!”

Well. I wasn’t really able to answer that. What was I supposed to say? ‘We’ll go find her, then’?



Why? Why isn’t Ling coming? What do I do?! This is too much, too soon! Charlotte was ignoring the puzzled-looking Ichika in front of her in favor of diving full-throttle into her own inner panic. Sometimes being an expert at the Rapid Switch had its own problems. *What do I do?! What do I do? It’s too soon being together... on a d-d-date like this...* Interpreting things how best works for herself is yet another privilege of a girl in love. *W-W-What do I do?! What do I do about this?*

Calming down, she realized that it was a great opportunity. She couldn’t let the chance to get as much out of ‘returning the favor for that bracelet’ as she could. Charlotte intertwined her hands behind herself, rubbing it as if to make sure it was still there. The courage feeling it gave her was enough to let her go through with betting it all.

“Then, um...”

“Yeah.”

“L-L-Let’s spend the day walking around together!”

“Sure!”

Charlotte was so emphatic that Ichika couldn’t help but follow along. The bemused gazes of passersby were enough to send her walking off to the neighboring shopping mall while blushing.

I'm alone together with Ichika... I'm alone together with Ichika... Should I hold his hand? Wait, no! He'll probably think I'm a weirdo if I do. But his hands are so big and wa—wait, no! No, no! Charlotte shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. She gripped her hands into fists, remembering the feel of Ichika's hand in hers.

"I don't need to!"

"Huh?"

"I don't need to, Ichika! Yeah! I don't need to at all!"

"I see. That's good. So, where should we go?"

"Er, uh, there!" Charlotte was so flustered that she didn't realize she was pointing directly at a lingerie shop.

"Eh? Uh, that's, umm, a bit..."

Only as Ichika's face flushed bright red did Charlotte realize where she was pointing. Her own face turned the same crimson, and she began to rapidly wave her hands.

"So-Sorry! I didn't mean that one! It was a different one! A different one!"

"Okay..."

Both blushing, they looked at each other for a moment before staring at their feet. The next time Ichika raised his eyes, by chance, he noticed what looked like a familiar face in the lingerie shop.

"Huh?"

"What's wrong? Ichika?"

"I just... Hey, Ran!" he called out, figuring it had to be her. Ran tensed up with a start at the sudden yell.

"I-Ichika?!"

She quickly hid the underwear she was looking at behind her back, before freezing up, not knowing what to do. *Did he see me?! I was just picking out panties, did he see me?! This was the first time they'd seen each other in a long time, too.* She blushed a deep crimson, and wished she could crawl in a hole and die.

What do I do? I mean, after I put this back... Ran stealthily slipped the black-and-white striped panties from behind her back onto the shelf. With the clearance sale, they were a great find at three for 1,000 yen, but she still didn't want to be spotted by her crush carrying them.

Hey, wait... Who's that girl with him? She's— She wasn't Ling, and she wasn't Houki. She was no one Ran knew. *She's a beautiful blonde, too. She looks like a model.* Rin anxiously compared Charl's hair to her own auburn locks. The Gotandas both had natural auburn hair without bleaching, but for a girl in love, it was still anxiety-driving. After realizing how she felt about Ichika, Ran had often been tempted to dye hers a flat black. *Anyway, he said hi, so I guess I should go see what's up.* The aura of the girl next to him—Charlotte—made her hesitant, though.

I can do this! It's okay! I can be forward even if I am the younger one! Five little Rans cheered her on inside her head. *Yeah! My idiot brother already cost me the chance to go to the school festival. This is the least I could ask for. I guess...*

She'd found out that Ichika had dressed—and worked—as a butler through the back channels that only teen girls seem to have. Once for getting the ticket. Once more when she saw the photos. She'd smacked Dan twice for this already, but this is the innocent heart of a girl in love we're talking about. Twice was nowhere near enough.

I'll be fine! It's Ichika's birthday this month! I'll see him there too! Ran had actually planned on shopping for a present today, but then she got distracted by clothing and things for herself—especially the panties. Her mind was under brutal occupation by the self-consciousness of being seen doing something embarrassing, but her heart was doing its best to liberate territory.

Yeah! I'll be fine! With hands clenched and a formal stride, Ran approached Ichika. She looked every inch the student council president of St. Marianne's Junior Academy for Girls.

"Hello, Ichika." Her smile gleamed with every ounce of girlish purity she could muster.

"Hey. You alone today?"

"Ah, yes. I was just browsing."

"I see. Sorry about before. You wanted to come to the festival, didn't you? Especially since you'll be attending next year."

"Well, yes. So it would be wonderful if you'd think of me the next time you have tickets."

As their friendly banter started up, Charlotte was the one left feeling like a third wheel.

Especially since Ichika being friends with girls from outside the academy wasn't exactly pleasing.

"Um, Ichika..."

"Ah! I'm sorry! Let me introduce you!"

She picked the perfect timing, and Ichika broke off from his conversation. The little bit of consideration from Ichika made her feel a lot better.

Woooow, she's gorgeous when she smiles! I can't let her beat me! Do your best, Ran!

She must be younger. Ichika's always extra-extra-thoughtful and considerate with younger people. I wish he'd be that way with me, too...

"This is Charl. She's a classmate, and a French National Cadet."

"Charlotte Dunois. Pleased to meet you."

"I'm Gotanda Ran. P-Pleased to meet you."



Charlotte took the upper hand, at least metaphorically, in the handshake. Ran's mind clouded over, feeling the silky delicacy of her skin.

"Hey, remember my friend Dan from the festival? She's his little sister."

"Yes."

"I see."

"I've heard she'll be enrolling in IS Academy next year. So she's going to be one of our underclassmen."

"Yes! Yes I will! It would be wonderful if you'd show me the ropes!" She swiftly bowed 90 degrees, then straightened up, her blood rushing to her head.

"Oh. Speaking of tickets. Ran, do you have your phone with you?"

"Y-Yeps!" *Ugh, I totally screwed that up! I'm so embarrassed...*

Pairing the phones, Ichika sent the ticket data over. "Huh, what's—"

"A VIP ticket to the Cannonball Fast next month. You wanted to see it, right?"

"Oh. Yes! Of course!"

"Just like the festival, I only get one to give out. So I don't have enough for your friends too."

"No, that's okay! It's fine! All my friends will be perfectly happy to just watch it on TV!"

"I see."

After the transfer completed, Ichika put his phone away. A few seconds later, Ran put hers back in her purse.

Ugh, I should have peeled off the stickers already. He must think I'm such a little kid... For Ichika, it just seemed cute, but for Ran, who wanted to be seen as a potential lover, that still would be a failure. I... I need to make up for that... But how? Charlotte's beautiful, I have no chance...

'That's not true!'

'Go for it!'

Ran could have sworn she heard voices cheering her on, and it was enough to make her speak up one more time, "Um, why don't we look around together?"

"Sure."

A casual OK. The sudden anticlimax deflated Ran so much that she nearly crumbled to the floor, before Charlotte swiftly caught her.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeps..."

She's incredible! Like some knight in shining armor! She's so cool and so cute and so beautiful, it's so unfair! There is no God! Ugh!

"All right, let's look around then."

At Ichika's nonchalant call, Charlotte and Ran nodded to each other before fanning out beside him.



“One, two! One, two!”

“There you are!”

“Target lock! Firing!”

Third IS Arena. Even on a day off, students eager to improve their standing were there practicing in their IS from dawn to dusk.

“Haah... Phew...”

On one side of the arena, Cecilia was catching her breath. Over and over, she'd commanded her bits to fire while in a high-speed roll, envisioning the laser bending in her mind. But not once had she succeeded in BT Flexible Fire, and the exhaustion was beginning to show on her face.

Once again, she focused, lifting the BT rifle Starlight Mk.III to her shoulder. Envisioning a pool of water, she fired above the target balloon.

Bend!

But rather than her vision, the laser pierced straightforward until it hit the backstop and dissipated.

“That's enough for today...” Sighing, she stowed her rifle. It evaporated from her right hand, transforming into sparkles of light.

As she returned to the waiting room, her face grew more and more glum, showing only frustration and exhaustion.

“Blue Tears, standby mode.”

Cecilia, bathed in light, was carried slowly to the ground by the PIC as her IS faded. *I need a warm shower. Maybe that will cheer me up.* Upon reaching the locker room and opening the door, an unexpected face awaited her inside.

“Oh? Cecilia? What's up, getting some practice in?”

“Ling... Yes, that sort of thing.”

For some reason, Cecilia felt the need to feign a smile for her regular practice partner. Not just for appearances, but as a matter of pride.

Whether she recognized it for the recognition of an equal it was or not, Ling moved on to the next topic. “I'm going to be trying to deploy my new gear. I was going to use the sixth arena, but it was booked full.”

“New gear? I suppose you mean your high-mobility package?”

“That's the one. Just you watch, Cecilia. I'll put up all the fight you can handle.”

“Perhaps. I'm quite looking forward to it.”

The challenge from a rival was enough to stoke Cecilia's passion.

It may even have been enough to take away her mental exhaustion. Ling had always been sharp at figuring out what made people tick.

“See you later!”

“Indeed. Farewell for now.”

As Ling waved, Cecilia smiled—an honest smile, this time—back, and they parted. *I will not lose! Not to anyone at this Academy!*

Refreshed, Cecilia entered the locker room with a spring in her step.



“So, does anything catch your eye?”

“Hmm...”

Looking over the display of watches, I hummed. I didn’t know how to choose between them, so I couldn’t tell what was good and what was bad. Honestly, even if you’d asked me to choose by design, nothing really stood out. *But Charl wants to get me one as a birthday present, so I want to seem happy about what I pick.*

“This one is especially popular. What do you think?”

“Oh, that? It’s not really...”

“I see.” Even the watch salesman was having trouble nailing me down. Dammit, I needed to do something.

“Oh, Ran, do you have a watch?”

“Me? Well...”

“Hm?”

“I don’t... I normally just check the time on my phone.”

“See, I’m not the only one.”

I nodded along as Charl placed both hands on her hips and began to jokingly scold, “Come on, both of you. Especially you, Ran. Girls should be more on top of fashion than that.”

“Really? I see.”

Looking at it, Charl was already taking Ran under her wing. Ran, meanwhile, was looking up to her. It seemed seniority had already been established.

“But it’s hard to buy a watch on an allowance...”

“Oh, right. As national cadets, we’re considered public officials, so we receive a stipend.”

“Oh really?” To be honest, I was extremely jealous of this fact.

“Yes, we do. You’re not a cadet yet, are you, Ichika?”

“Well, uh, it’s still hung up in red tape at the International IS Agency.”

“Mm-hm. It’s been a while, hasn’t it.”

“It sure has.”

It was already September, and still no progress. This was the trouble with being the only boy in the world who could pilot an IS. And probably, though I wasn’t sure, Tabane’s involvement in

Byakushiki's creation was also an obstacle. They seemed very insistent on making sure that Japan didn't have a lock on the latest technology. It was really a pain.

"Anyway, if we keep this up we'll never pick out a watch." Charl brought things back on topic. She must have felt sorry for the poor salesman.

"I guess. Hmm..."

"What if I pick the one I think would look best on you?"

"Oh, that sounds great. You have good fashion sense."

"Really, you think so? Thanks. All right, I'll come up with something!"

"....." As much as that lit Charl up, Ran seemed frustrated for some reason. *What's up with her?*

When Charl realized Ran's mood, she called out to her, "Why don't you give me a hand, too, Ran? You don't get the chance to do this very often."

"Eh? Oh, yes!"

"Don't worry about the price, either."

"Okay!"

"Hey, hold it. I can't have you spending too much."

"Oh? And what's it to you? After all, you're the recipient."

"No, well, maybe, but... Don't you kind of get a little worried whenever you put on something expensive?"

"Something a high school student can buy with a part-time job, then. Will that be fine?"

"Well, uhh... Just remember I need to get something similar for your birthday in return, Charl."

"Me? Oh, thank you!"

"And on your birthday too, of course, Ran."

"Really? Thanks so much!"

With that, Charl and Ran spent 20 or so minutes choosing me a watch. Eventually, they returned with their selection.

"How about this?" It was an alloy that glimmered like white gold. "I think it suits you better than silver. See, it matches the gauntlet on your right hand."

Listening to her, I pulled my right sleeve up. Under it was a white gauntlet, the IS Byakushiki in standby mode.

"You're right. They match."

"I think it'll look good on you! Really good!"

"Yeah. Thanks for helping, Ran."

"Oh, no problem! It was a piece of cake!"

That must have struck something in Ran's mind, as her stomach began to rumble. She blushed. That's right, it was noon. Time for lunch.

“Hahaha. Let’s go get something to eat after this.”

“Yeah... Thanks...”

Even her ears were red. It was adorable, and I patted her head. Meanwhile, Charl was having the salesman wrap the watch.

“Charl, what do you want for lunch?”

“Not sure, how about you?”

“Ran? Anything in particular? My treat.”

“No, that’s fine! I’ll cover mine!”

“You don’t have to. How about that terrace cafe across the way?”

“It seems pretty expensive.”

“I told you, I’d treat. Or have you been there before?”

“Just for drinks...”

“Then it’s decided. We’ll get lunch there.”

“Okay. Thank you!” Ran was fidgeting her fingers together while looking down, blushing in visible discomfort. She must have really been embarrassed by her stomach rumbling earlier. I felt like it was mean of me to remind her of it.

“Anyway, let’s get going.”

“Sure.”

Charl took the bagged watch and led us toward the cafe. I and then Ran followed her inside.

“Wow, this place is really fancy. On a warm day like today, it’s the perfect choice.”

Charl smiled as the wind seemed to pat her hair. At times like these, she really seemed like a young noblewoman. My heart skipped a beat.

“Welcome!”

“Can I ask about today’s specials?”

“Of course. Today’s special is spaghetti in crab cream sauce. Dessert is a pear tart.”

“Three of those, please.”

“Very well.” Having taken our order, the waiter left for the kitchen. I noticed Charl and Ran looking at me intently.

“W-What?”

“You seem really accustomed to this kind of thing.”

“Well, just, uh. I don’t eat out at restaurants often, but Chifuyu always told me that I should at least learn how to order smoothly.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Do you come to this kind of place often, Ichika?”

“Nah, like I said, I don’t eat out much, except for at your place.”

“Ours is nothing like this...”

“C’mon. There’s no reason to be embarrassed. The lunches at Gotanda’s are delicious.”

“Just calling it that embarrasses me.”

The thought processes of a teenaged girl were hard to understand. Personally, I would have been proud of it.

"Anyway, ah..." As she looked at Charl, Ran's mouth moved as if she were trying to say something. Whatever it was, it seemed like she was having a hard time getting it out.

"Yes?"

"Ichika and Charlotte, are you two going out?"

"What?!"

"Hey, where'd that come from?"

"Just... You get along so well together..."

"Well, I mean, we did team up that one time. Right, Charl?"

"Mm. I guess..." Charl was shocked by the sudden question, and she blushed red. Something had definitely gotten into Ran today. I wonder what?

"...That's good. At least they're not dating..."

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing!"

As we spoke, the waiter had already returned with our lunch. He carried three plates to our table. They looked amazing. With a "My apologies for the wait," he placed them in front of us. Each plate of the spaghetti in crab cream sauce had a claw perched on top of it, as if to beckon to us. The smell of crab in the cream sauce was mouthwatering. I wanted to dig right in.

"I'll return later with your desserts." The waiter left again. Each of us took up our fork and spoon and prepared to dine.

"Let's eat."

"Yes, let's eat."

"T-Thank you!"

Me, then Charl, then Ran, put our hands together, and began our meal.

"This is great!"

"Yeah. The sign said they're using fresh pasta."

"It's delicious."

The lunch special included free refills of iced herbal tea, and it was the perfect match. For a while, we stopped talking to eat, and simply kept our forks moving. *This really is delicious. I wonder what they season it with.*

"Mm? Hey, Ran, hold on a second."

"Huh?"

I picked up a napkin and wiped her face.

".....?!"

"You had some sauce on you."

"You could have just told me! I could have wiped it off myself."

"Oh, right. Sorry."

“Ah, er, I mean, it’s not like I mind... Thank you.”

Ran turned a beet red. Perhaps I wasn’t delicate enough about it. I should learn from this.



Oh, oh wow... Ran softly held a hand to her chest, as if to hold back her pounding heart, as she replayed what just happened in her mind. *I-I-Ichika just wiped my mouth!* She may have felt it through a napkin, but the tender sensation of his gentle fingers still throbbed through her mouth—through her lips.

It’s okay, right? I was sure to put on my lipstick today, so I’m fine, aren’t I? Ran asked everyone and no one in her head over and over. Thoughts of the pasta she’d been enjoying 120% until now were completely driven from her mind. Half in a panic, she simply cycled her fork like a machine.

Him saying he’d treat made him seem really mature, too... When he had in the past, it’d always been something like a can of soda or a shooting game at the arcade. *He was always really good at those games, too...* Ran thought back to her own quick game overs. She remembered watching Ichika out of the corner of her eye as she pretended to pay attention to the game. When he fired, so quickly and precisely, he seemed as cool as the hero of some action movie.

But Charlotte’s so beautiful and so adorable at the same time, and she’s a national cadet too... It doesn’t seem fair... Once Ran decided to apply to IS Academy, she had spent all summer cramming up on everything about IS. Eight or nine out of every ten national cadets accepted to IS Academy had their own personal IS too. In other words, they were the elite of the elite.

I saw on the news that that Houki girl had her own IS now, too. They even said that it was built by Dr. Shinonono herself... Ugh... Ran bemoaned the unfairness of it all, not realizing her own advantages as Ichika’s best friend’s little sister.

“By the way, Ran.”

“Eh?!”

“The ticket for Cannonball Fast I gave you is for the same day as my birthday. You okay if we start the party at my place a little bit late?”

“Oh, that’s fine! That idio—uh, my brother will be there too.”

“Oh, yeah. That makes sense.”

“Yeah...” Ran suddenly realized another problem, beside just getting home. “Is anyone from IS Academy coming?!”

“Why’s that matter? I mean, of course they are, but...”

“H-How many?!”

“Oh, five or so.”

“Five...”

The world spun around Ran. Ling, Houki, and Charlotte were strong enough rivals. The thought of two more sent her almost into a panic.

This is bad, this is really bad. There's no way a handmade cake and something small will be a good enough gift... Her self-confidence began to collapse. She was pretty proud of her own cooking, but Ichika was handy in the kitchen in his own right, and just thinking of the price of the watch Charlotte bought made her shrink back into herself. *But I can't ask for an advance on my allowance, and my school forbids part-time jobs... Ugh!*

As she stewed, Ran's thoughts turned to Ling. *I wonder what Ling's going to do... She's a national cadet too. So she must get plenty of money from the military...* She thought back to when Ling was in middle school and seemed much more of an even match. Though maybe that was just the clash between Japanese and Chinese food.

Phew... I've got too way much competition... Ran slumped down gloomily. As she stopped eating, Ichika became worried and asked, “What's wrong? Full already?”

“N-No! Er, I mean, yeah, I'm fine! I'm done!”

“I see. That's great, if you're full I can finish yours off.”

“T-Thanks.”

Even as she spoke, Ran realized the implications of giving him food that had touched her lips. Imagining that maybe-indirect kiss, her cheeks turned red again. *Ichika's probably already kissed someone...* With the thought racing through her mind, she felt more and more self-conscious about the parts of her own lips he had just touched. As she casually reached her own hand up and ran her fingertips softly over them, they seemed to almost burn. *I wonder what a kiss feels like...* Ran wandered lost in her own thoughts until lunch was over and it was time for dessert.

“Huh? Each of our ice cream flavors are different.”

“Looks that way. I wonder why?”

“Hmm, mine is strawberry, Ichika's is vanilla, and Charl's is chocolate.”

“You're right.” As Ran watched Ichika nod, a crazy thought filled her head. *Are... Are we meant to share the different flavors between us?* An involuntary grin sprung to her face as she imagined asking Ichika to open wide. Shaking the fantasy off, she gazed at her ice cream.

“Hey, why don't we feed it to each other.”

“Whaa?”

“Hmm?”

“Err, what did you just—”

“I dunno, it just seems like what you're supposed to do.”

“.....!” Ran wondered if it was just a dream. If it was, pinching her thigh should wake her up. **Pinch!**

“Oww!”

“What’s wrong?!”

“Oh, nothing! Nothing at all!”

It wasn’t a dream! The pinch of the pain had brought her back to reality, but Ichika was still there and he really had just said that! *Ahh, I can’t believe it! It’s like a dream! Ichika’s gonna feed me!*

“All right, let’s start with my vanilla. Charl, say ‘ahh.’”

“Ahh.”

Charlotte swallowed the spoonful of vanilla ice cream. The blush on her face was all the proof Ran needed that she was a romantic rival.

“This is delicious.”

“Oh? That’s good. You’re next, Ran.”

“Okay!”

“Say ‘ahh.’”

“Ahh...”

Chomp.

Ahhhh, what do I do? What do I do?! I can’t even tell how it tastes... But it feels so good... Ran, in a daze, continued running her tongue over the spoon even after the ice cream was gone.

“Ran.”

“Mm?”

“Done yet?”

“Huh?! Oh, of course! That was delicious!” Flustered, she pulled the spoon from her mouth. *I can’t believe I just did that...* Student council president Gotanda Ran wouldn’t be caught dead doing something so embarrassing. But this wasn’t her. This was just another girl in love.



Hmm, looks like she likes Ichika too. As she watched the two interact, Charlotte confirmed her suspicions. *I guess he really does just attract women without even thinking about it.* With a quiet, private sigh, she took another bite of ice cream. *Do your best, Charl!*

“I-Ichika, let me give you some of mine.”

“Sure.”

“Say ‘ahh.’”

“Ahh.”

Chomp.

“How is it? Is it any good?”

“Mmm! This has cocoa powder streaks in it too! It’s incredible!”

“Ohh! That’s interesting.”

In her heart, Charlotte was a little bit disappointed that Ichika was seriously breaking it down so intently. *C'mon, Ichika, I'm feeding you. You don't have to focus that hard. Can't you just relax and ignore the food itself for a little bit?* A little Charl ran around inside her head, pounding her fists. Still, though, Charlotte was sincere and conscientious enough to share with Ran as well.

"You next, Ran. Say 'ahh.'"

"Ahh."

Chomp.

Wait, huh?

"It is really good." Ran smiled. Meanwhile, Charlotte was anything but calm on the inside.

Did... Did she just get an indirect kiss with Ichika? She's so lucky... Charlotte's jealousy shone in her eyes. Without really even thinking about it, she was consumed with the urge to lick the spoon too. *No. No, I can't. That's going way too far.*

Only her iron will held her back until a realization struck. *Oh, right! It's my turn next for an... For an indirect... kiss...* Her heart pounding, she looked again at the spoon in Ran's hand. Her eyes burned, and her cheeks shone a cherry-blossom pink.

"A-Anyway, Ichika! Say 'ahh'!"

"Ahh."

Chomp.

"Mmm! This has fruit in it, too! It's great."

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum... Charlotte's heart pounded like a drum.

"You next, Charlotte. Say 'ahh.'"

"A-Ahh."

Chomp.

A-A-An indirect kiss with Ichika! I'm indirect kissing him! What do I do?! She couldn't even taste the ice cream. She could feel the almost crisp sherbet-like texture, but even that was faint and distant.

"It... It's nice."

"Oh! That's good."

Charlotte sorrowfully watched the spoon recede as Ran took it from her mouth. The realization of how shameful her own behavior was brought a deeper blush to her cheeks. *Ran... Ran really is a good girl.* She had deliberately fed Ichika first or the indirect kiss wouldn't have happened. Or maybe she had just wanted to feed Ichika first, but Charlotte was happy to consider it as considerate.

Oh man. What do I do? My heart won't stop pounding... She felt like her chest was going to explode from sheer glee. As they finished their desserts, she couldn't taste her chocolate ice cream at all.

◆

“Thank you for walking me home.”

“Mm. Say hi to Dan for me.”

“Sure.”

It was shortly past four in the afternoon. Ichika, Charlotte, and Ran were standing in front of Gotanda’s in the early fall twilight. After lunch, they’d each done their own shopping, until finally, Ichika offered to walk Ran home—which brought them here. Ran was almost tempted to offer them dinner, but as it was still only 4 PM, she gave up on the idea. It was still way too early.

“Anyway, uh, see you at the party.”

“Yeah. Don’t forget to cheer for me at Cannonball Fast!”

“Of course! Do your best!” As she spoke, Ran couldn’t bring herself to look directly at Ichika, and instead kept glancing around. It seemed almost like she was worried about being spotted by her family, or what they’d say after. *Please... Please, just don’t let my idiot brother walk out the door... Not dad either... Please...*

As she thought, she took one last look at Ichika’s face. *He really is soooo cool...* Ran thought back to the first time they met. The day she fell in love in 0.1 seconds. ‘Love at first sight doesn’t exist. That’s just silly.’ The day she learned how foolish she was for thinking so. People fall in love over the smallest things. A more complex reason can be figured out later. What matters is that first impression which never fades. And once it starts, it will never stop. Love cannot be stopped.

“I-Ichika.”

“Yes?”

“Um... Uh, well...”

Holding her hands behind her, Ran twisted her index fingers around each other. **Fidget, fidget.** Hunting for the words she wanted to say, but failing in her search, she eventually left off with a regretful ‘Goodnight!’

Ugh, I’m such an idiot! A big dumb idiot! She walked into her house, climbing the stairs quickly while berating herself.

“You’re back?”

As she stepped on to the second-floor landing, she came face-to-face with Dan. In his hand was a cup of expensive ice cream she’d been saving.

“YOU MORON!” Ran released all of her pent-up frustration with a kick.

◆

I’m walking home alone together with Ichika... Alone... Together...
Charlotte and Ichika walked back to IS Academy, enveloped in a

strange quiet. Mostly, it was due to Charlotte's fretting, but Ichika's consideration for her made him silent as well.

"Today was fun."

"Ah? Yeah! Yeah, it was!" Charlotte had been stumbling in a haze of confusion over how to use this chance and frustration that she couldn't think of a way since they arrived at their bus stop. The tiny Charlottes inside her head were embroiled in heated debate. *Ahh, we're almost to the gate. This is no good, once we get inside we'll probably run into so someone. What do I say... What do I say...*

"Hey, Ichika."

"Yes?"

"Do you listen to music a lot?"

"A friend of mine used to lend me CDs all the time in middle school, but I haven't really bought anything lately. I've been too busy with my IS."

"Yeah, you're right. Heeey, speaking of which."

"Yeah?"

"The new gear I got shipped in from France is really good! It's got a really high rate of fire, and a big magazine!"

"Really? That sounds cool. That must mean you'll be even better at shooting, then."

"Y-Yeah! Ahahahah..."

Arggh, I'm so stupid! That wasn't girly at all! I need to think of something better to say! If Ichika hadn't been there, she would have pounded on her head in frustration.

"Oh, there's Houki."

Too late. Charlotte's heart sunk.

"Hey! Hey, Houki!" Ichika called out to Houki, like Charlotte knew he would. And of course, she turned around and rushed over to meet them.

"Ichika and Charlotte. Did you two go out somewhere?"

"Yeah, shopping. Right?"

"Y-Yeah."

"To-Together?!"

"Nah. Ran was there too. Well, we ran into her. Right?"

"Y-Yeah."

Houki furrowed her brow at Charlotte and her conspicuous guilt.

"Well, I guess it's okay if it wasn't just you two." She cleared her throat as she stood with her arms crossed. "But if you're going to go shopping, you should invite me along. It's not like I don't need to pick up things for myself, as well."

"Sure thing. I'll text you next time."

"Yes. That's fine," Houki nodded, her cheeks a pale red. "Anyway. Since you're returning just before dinner, why don't we eat together?"

“Sure!”

“I guess I’ll join in.”

“Very well. Why don’t we each go back to our rooms, and then meet at the dining hall entrance? Say, in around ten minutes?”

“If Laura’s in, should I invite her too?”

“Sure. It’s more fun to eat as a group. I’ll try to get a hold of Rin too.”

“Why does Ling need to be involved?!”

“Well, she was gonna come along today, but then something came up. She should be done by now though.”

“...She really worms her way into absolutely everything...”

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing!” Flustered, Houki cleared her throat to change the subject. “Anyway, see you then.”

“Got it!”

“Yeah!” Charlotte and Houki each answered energetically, with a smile.

Chapter III: Cannonball Fast

Sunday. After school. I was hanging around the tennis courts, feeling miserable. *It* had finally begun. ‘It’ being the Student Council Executive Branch’s Rent-an-Ichika program.

“Phew...”

They had ended up holding a bingo tournament for first dibs. And first place ended up going to the tennis team. But that wasn’t what was really bringing me down. What was really bringing me down was the second half of it, going on on the court right now: the Massage from Ichika Cup.

“Haaah!”

“I won’t lose!”

“I’m gonna get that massage Cecilia wouldn’t shut up about!”

What did you tell them, Cecilia? More importantly, why were you fighting so hard to get another? That just made it seem even worse.

“Here I go!”

“Ugh! So fast!”

“Is that all you’ve got?!”

“Ahh!”

Cecilia, you’re really taking this seriously... Ah well. I supposed it was better than how she had been acting. Lately, she’d been pushing herself harder and harder, spending all her free time in the arenas. If the thought of a massage from me was all it took to take the edge off of that exhaustion, well, it was a small price to pay. She advanced to the finals, and took the crown with straight sets. Meanwhile, I was kept busy bringing the competitors fresh towels and sports drinks.

“Great job, Cecilia. You won it all.”

“Haah... Haah... Of course... I did... Phew...”

“Here’s a towel. And something so you can rehydrate.”

“Ah... Ichika? My arms... My arms feel like noodles... Right now... Could you perhaps... Wipe my face?”

“Sure. No problem.”

That was no surprise, since the victor had to play the most matches. I wiped off the sweat dripping from her face, like she asked. As I did so, cries of sorrow arose from the crowd around us.

“Ah—”

“What are you doing, Cecilia!”

“I know you won, but that’s still no fair! It’s just no fair!”

We were being booed off the court, but Cecilia smirked back while flicking a lock of hair out of her eyes.

“Unfair? But I’m the winner.” As she spoke, she posed with a hand on her hip, seeming almost to shine under the glowering stares.

“Grrr...”

“I hate it! I hate how she acts like a pretty princess!”

“Orimura! You’re gonna have to do that for everyone now!”

Urk. Why were they coming after me?!

“I know! When we go change, we should make him dry our backs.”

“Ah! That’s good! That’s a great idea!”

“I’m soaking in sweat, I could really use it.”

“Doesn’t that sound good, Orimura!”

I was immediately surrounded by girls angling for their turn, and fumbled for a way to deal with them.

“There’s no way I can do that! When you go change... I mean, you’re all going to be in your underwear...”

I let myself dream of the sight. The entire tennis club stripped down to bras and panties as I wandered through the room, scrubbing backs. *Ugh, dammit! I can’t!*

“Th-That isn’t on the list of what I’m here for!”

“EHHHHH?!”

The boos only intensified.

“C’mon, it’ll be fine!”

“They’re sports bras, so it’s not embarrassing!”

I crossed my arms in refusal and yelled as they latched on like hungry deer at a petting zoo, “No! Absolutely not!”

The booing became so intense that it echoed across the tennis court.



Ahh, how absolutely blissful it will be to receive such a massage again... Cecilia, having thoroughly washed every drop of sweat away, hummed happily as she rinsed the lather off. This was her second shower, the first after practice and the second after returning to her room.

The shiatsu is a touch painful, but the lymphatic massage afterward... Simply wonderful. Imagining the sensation of his palms running over her, she closed her eyes in rapture.

“Hmm~ Hmm-hmm~♪”

The notes of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* sprang from her lips. As a composition which could be played on piano or violin, its melody, rhythm, and tempo were pure and direct. The beauty of Cecilia’s own voice was met with backing from the echoes of the shower.

After I finish washing, I'll put on some rose perfume. She had really wanted to bathe with rose petals, but had given up on it as too impractical. Still, for the boy she fancied, she wanted to make the best impression possible. *But what shall I wear for lingerie?* Cecilia pondered whether to wear the sexy ensemble she'd purchased while at home in England over the summer, but the advice she'd received from her maid and close confidante Chelsea ate at her: "I must advise you, overly-showy lingerie rarely does what it's supposed to."

I wonder if she may be right... But wait, isn't she single as well? Still, Chelsea's knowing laugh as she spoke made Cecilia suspect there was a hint of truth to her words. *Perhaps the best choice is no choice at all.* Quite risqué, to be sure, but more tempting the longer she thought of it. *That's it. Clothing would only get in the way of a massage, anyway... Something down below, though, of course!*

She stepped out of the shower, having settled on a decision. In her dressing area, she chose only a pair of low-rise panties and a silk blouse. *This is... a bit too risqué...* Suddenly overcome by embarrassment, she buttoned her blouse.



The sensation of her arms brushing against her breasts only fanned her discomposure.

"I must, of course, comport myself as a proper lady."

It took Cecilia another 30 minutes to finish choosing her outfit.

Finally, before Ichika's door, she cleared her throat and announced her presence with a timid knock.

"Hey. I've been waiting for you, Cecilia."

"Of course. My sincerest apologies for the wait."

In the end, she had made the safe choice of a pair of pajamas. They were silk, of course, and their luster gleamed in the soft light. *I went with rather conservative lingerie, in the end... I hope it'll be fine.* 'Safe' and 'conservative' were, of course, relative terms when speaking of a wardrobe easily three times the cost of an average high school student's, but this was simply a question of her class.

"Let's get started, then?"

"What?! I-I thought we'd relax with tea first..."

"Oh, right. Sorry." Ichika patted the empty bed to indicate Cecilia should sit down, and walked toward the kitchen area. "I only have bagged black tea, is that all right?"

"I-I suppose I'll endure, just this once."

"Thanks."

Ba-dum.

As casual as her words were, her emotions were anything but. Her heart was spurred on by thoughts of making her crush hers and hers alone. *He... His workouts lately have certainly been quite effective.* Ichika had improved as an IS pilot, as well, and was even getting the hang of energy management. Cecilia had watched his progress with mixed emotions.

I'm quite glad he's becoming strong, but as for my own position...

Lately, he hadn't needed help from her at all, and it stung. When he had asked for training in high-speed combat, she'd turned him down in a fit of pique, but perhaps now was the time to reconsider. As she mulled it over, Ichika returned with the tea.

"Here."

"Why, thank you."

It was slightly cooler than normal and easy to drink as she let its taste fill her mouth. *Because a hot tea requires such careful sipping...* The gracious consideration only made her heart pound harder.

They sat in silence, drinking their tea, for ten minutes.

No. No! I can't let him think I'm so dull that I can't even carry on a conversation! Ichika, of course, was just as silent, but Cecilia abhorred the vacuum between them and cast about for a topic.

"I must ask, Ichika. How are you finding the student council?"

"Huh? Hmm. I had been helping out until now, but now I'm being rented out to other clubs. Honestly, it's hard work."

"It must feel wonderful to be in such demand."

"Really? Does it even make anyone happy that I'm there?"

"Well, I certainly was!" Cecilia, without thinking, leaned forward enthusiastically.

"I guess. But calm down a little, okay?"

"Understood..."

As she sat back down on the place Ichika had patted, she finished her tea.

"Hmm? Are you done with your tea too? Let's get started with the massage, then."

"O-Of course!" Embarrassed by her stutter, Cecilia lay down on the bed. "Er, Ichika..."

"Yes?"

"Well, umm..."

Shall I say it? Wait, will he think I'm strange? No! Just let it out!

"Shall I take off my drawers?"

"Wha—"

"I-I thought it would make it easier to massage!"

"It'll be fine. Don't worry about it, Cecilia. And please don't start sounding like Tatenashi."

Hmph. So he's heard that from her before? Simply unforgivable. Just—I mean, just as a lady!

"Cecilia?"

"What is it?!"

"Try to relax a little bit more. You're all tense."

"Understood."

She took a deep breath and relaxed. Just as she began to calm down, though, her pulse raced again at the realization that Ichika was about to touch her.

"All right, I'll start with your legs."

"Very well."

As her heart raced, he laid a palm on her leg. ***Ba-dum!***

The massage slowly began, accompanied by the sound of her silk pajamas rustling as they rubbed between her legs. It was all she could do to hold back her excitement, as even the sensation of the massage barely reached her racing mind. *Ahh... It still feels so good...* His palms released the stress and exhaustion which filled her legs. Not just through the touch alone, but through it being *his*. Cecilia, filled with a satisfaction beyond words, let out a warm sigh.

"Ahh... Ichika, you're quite good at this..."

"Mm. Thanks."

With her calves done, Ichika moved to her thighs. The touch raced up her spine like a bolt of lightning, and she struggled to form a coherent sentence.

“So, ur, what do you think? About my figure.”

“Hmm? Your legs are nice and long. Have you ever modeled?”

“A number of my duties as a national cadet have been quite similar. Lately, we’ve been treated almost as idols.”

“I see. You’ll have to show me pictures sometime.”

“Of course. I’ll bring some by later.”

Cecilia’s words were nonchalant, but her mind raced as she thought of which to bring. *There are some in gowns, but many in my usual clothes as well... And a few in swimsuits...* She regretted not having taken the photoshoots more seriously now that this moment had come. In fact, she could barely remember what she had worn this summer at her family manor. In other words, it was a complete failure.

It’s no fair only asking me now, Ichika! Cecilia, irked, puffed out her cheeks. But the massage felt so good that the frustration lasted not even two minutes. *It feels so wonderful...* She sighed languidly as he moved from her knees to her thighs. Finally, with her hip joints done, Ichika hesitated for a moment before moving on.

“Ahh... Um, er... Shall I move on to your lower back?”

“Not at all! I’d like you to massage it all, even... Even my rear...”

“Okay.” Ichika nodded as if working up his own gumption, and took a deep breath.

Perhaps he’s beginning to notice me, too? That she was a woman. That she was a potential partner. *Still, it’s embarrassing to be touched there...*

“We-Well, Cecilia. Here goes.”

“As you will.”

The pounding in her chest was becoming painful. Cecilia swallowed nervously, cautious to not be noticed, as she waited for Ichika’s touch. *I’ve done 30 minutes of lower-body stretches a day. That... That should be enough, right?*

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.

Smoosh.

“Mm?!”

Ichika’s fingers sunk into the soft flesh. Cecilia, thinking more of it being Ichika’s hands on her butt than of the massage, felt her mind begin to boil over as her face flushed bright red.

“Am I tense there?”

“A-A bit, I guess. Wait, I know. Cecilia, do you play the piano?”

“Yes. When I perform, I’m intensely focused, and of course... During practice, I’m seated for hours on end...”

“I see...”

“Indeed.”

Ichika and Cecilia both hunted desperately for something to speak about. Meanwhile, in Ichika’s brain... *Wow, it’s so soft! It’s even softer than Tatenashi’s! Oh man, I gotta focus...* And so on.

Hoping to move on to her lower back quickly, Ichika sped up. But it just made the sensations on his palms more intense, as he blushed while leaning over her.

“Should I move on to your back now?”

“Very well.” Cecilia longed to be touched just a little more, but realizing she was approaching her own limits, she nodded along to Ichika’s suggestion. *Any more and... Well, any more should happen after we’re dating...*

“If it hurts, tell me.”

“Of course.”

As he practiced shiatsu on her back, she was enveloped in pressure, but also in the comfort of his light touch. Unlike her rear, for her back, he worked each joint intently, and soon another sigh of relaxation and something more wafted from her lips. *Ahhh... It feels so good... Like my exhaustion from today is floating away...*

Her euphoria stretched out another five or ten minutes. Then, as his hands reached her neck, Ichika suddenly spoke, “Cecilia?”

“Mmm?!”

He had whispered directly in her ear. The sensation of his breath on her skin almost made her leap.

“Your hair is beautiful. And it smells so nice.”

“Well, er, I use a quality shampoo, and— Ahh!”

Ichika wove his fingers into her hair, twirling it back and forth. The sensation of his touch on the back of her neck sent Cecilia’s world spinning. *Ichika? What are you doing all of a sudden? Ha-Have you noticed my beauty?* Cecilia’s chest ached as her heart pounded so fast she didn’t even have time to add a ‘finally.’ Ichika had laid himself over her gently, as if to cover her, and she could feel the warmth of his body.

“Cecilia...”

“Y-Yes?”

“Can I touch you directly?”

“Go ahead...”

At Cecilia’s timid response, Ichika slipped a hand under her pajamas. *Eek!* Shock and passion ran as one through her nerves. *Ichika... Ahh, this is like a dream...*

“It’s not a dream.”

Ahh, it’s really happening! Wait, that’s strange...

“It’s not strange at all.”

There it is again! He's replying to things I didn't say!

Cecilia pushed herself up in confusion. And before her eyes was—

“And after all the advice I gave you to choose modest lingerie?”

“Chelsea?!”

Her personal maid, Chelsea, was here all the way from England.

“This is...”

“Yes. It's a dream.”

Cecilia heard a sound like a balloon popping. As the world faded to white around her, all she could see was Chelsea's grin.



“...Just terrible. That's just terrible!”

Cecilia awoke with a start. Glowing from the side of her bed was an illuminated clock, the hands pointing to 2:00 in the morning.

“Where am I?”

Her bed felt different than usual, and she glanced around, trying to figure out where she was. In the next bed, there was someone sleeping.

“Ichika?” That meant that getting the massage wasn't a dream. The question was... *When did it turn into one?* She'd definitely won the tennis tournament, earned a massage as her reward, drifted off during it, and awoken in Ichika's room. “Phew.”

Somehow, a wave of exhaustion came back over her, and she slumped back into bed. On the other side of the room, Ichika slept quietly. *This was such a failure...* Cecilia couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it all, before glancing over at Ichika affectionately. *Someday, someday I'll steal your heart.*

She formed her fingers into a gun, and aimed carefully.

“Bang.” A playful smile drifted to her face.



“WHAAAAAAT?!” A shout echoed through the morning cafeteria.

Ssh! Sssshhh!

“Shh! Charl! Rin! Quiet down!”

“B-B-But! But!”

“Ichika! Explain yourself!”

There were tears in Charl's eyes, while Rin was glaring at me questioningly.

“Why did Cecilia leave your room in her pajamas this morning?!”

It seemed there had been a grave misunderstanding.

“Why, he was a perfect gentleman. Isn't that right?” Cecilia flicked her hair with a giggle.

Cecilia! Why do you have to pour gas on the fire?! With a sneer at

me, she continued speaking, “We simply spent a wonderful evening together. That’s all.”

“I can’t believe you!”

“Ichika!”

“Gah! Wait! Come on! I just gave her a massage! She fell asleep during it, and I wasn’t going to wake her up to kick her out! That’s all!” I was telling the truth and nothing but the truth. With that, Charl and Rin were at least assuaged enough to sigh in relief and sit back down.

“That’s it?”

“I figured it was something like that.”

They turned their attention back to their meals: Charl was having a cream stew, while Rin had chosen the house yakisoba.

“You didn’t need to tell them the truth, you fool.”

“Hm? Didn’t hear you, Cecilia.” Cecilia had muttered something at me over her BLT bagel. I looked over at her, trying to figure out what.

“Oh, nothing at all.”

Huh? What was she mad about? I didn’t get it. I was just glad Houki and Laura weren’t around. They’d definitely have very loud opinions about the whole mess.

“.....”

“.....”

Huh? That’s funny. I could feel two cold stares on my back. Sure enough, turning around, there the twin terrors were with arms crossed.

“Ichika... You’ve broken the rules of the dorms.”

“The rules?”

“Special Rule Number 1! Girls must not stay overnight in a boy’s room!”

“Calm down, Laura!”

“Shut up! If you’re so into that kind of thing, fine! I’ll stay over tonight!”

“Wha?!”

“Wait, what are you talking about? If that’s going to happen, I’ll stay over as a chaperone! We need to strike a balance!” Houki chimed in too.

Why me...

“Ooh! No fair! I will too then!”

“Ichika! Take me first! We’ve been friends since childhood!”

Ugh, even Charl and Rin were getting in on the act. What was going on here?!

“And just what is this commotion?” The room froze over as everyone recognized that voice. Standing in a jet-black suit which perfectly fit her personality, with arms crossed and finger tapping, was

my sister, Orimura Chifuyu. "I'm surrounded by idiots, aren't I."

That was five slaps in one swift motion. And one knuckle-on punch for me. It hurt. A lot.

"Alcott."

"Yes?!"

"I expect a written note of contrition."

"Y-Yes, ma'am..."

"And Orimura."

"Yes?"

"Three days in the brig. Feel grateful it isn't anything more."

"T-Thank you..."

That was plenty harsh. But that's just how my sister was. "Now! How much longer are you going to waste stuffing your idiotic faces? Finish eating, and get to class! Dismissed!"

With a clap of her hands, the girls moved from on the tips of their toes to clearing out of the cafeteria in disarray. Meanwhile, I slurped up the miso from my grilled salmon meal. *Is it just me, or is this a bit salty?* It must have been the salt of my tears.

I ate another punch, maybe because she realized I was thinking something so stupid.



"Very well, everyone. Today we're training in high-speed maneuvers." The voice of Class 1-A's assistant homeroom teacher, Yamada Maya, sounded through the sixth arena. "You'll remember that last week, I mentioned that Arena Six is connected to Central Tower so we can conduct high-speed maneuver exercises. To begin with, I'd like those of you with your own IS to demonstrate for the class."

With that, Ms. Yamada made a show of pointing at Cecilia and me before continuing, "First, Alcott, with the Strike Gunner high-mobility package!"

It looked like the big difference in this package was its use of both the four cannon bits which normally attached to her side binders, and the two missile bits which rested on her hips as auxiliary thrusters. Each cannon was disabled, and they mounted on her hips for high speed and high mobility. At first glance, they looked like a blue skirt.

"Second, Orimura! While he isn't using a specialized package, his thrusters have been tuned for increased output to provide an ersatz high-mobility mode! I'd like you each to complete one lap!"

Cheers of encouragement arose from the rest of the class. We each waved a hand in acknowledgment, then focused on materializing our IS. *Hmm, what do I do with this high-mobility assist visor?*

"Ichika, is there anything you're having trouble with?" Cecilia's

voice over a private channel was as relieving as a passing ship to an adrift sailor.

“Good timing. Do I really need to change visor modes? What do you think?”

“Yes, that mode’s specialized for high speeds. You also need to set each thruster to linked vision.”

“Got it. Like this?”

A quick shift of focus, and a veil of light washed over me. Suddenly, the world was so much clearer.

“It may make you a bit queasy if you’re not used to it. Be careful.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Did you really think *I* wouldn’t be able to help you with that?” I could almost hear her blush over the private channel as I floated into the air.

“Then... Three, two, one, go!”

At Ms. Yamada’s signal, we soared into the air, and quickly broke the sound barrier. The scenery below streaked by, but thanks to the assist visor I could make it out clearly. *This is really amazing!* I was astounded at the speed of our IS, even though it really wasn’t much more than a standard Ignition Boost.

“Beat you to it!” Cecilia left me in the dust as I lost focus pondering my speed. Rising up higher, she made for the Central Tower, visible from anywhere on campus.

Wow, she has a lot of practice at this. I’ve gotta keep up! Feeling out of my element, I made each movement like I was walking on eggshells. If I rammed into that tower at Mach 1, it’d be more than just bruises. Not just for me, the shockwave from my impact might well collapse it. I kept a close eye on my speed, heading, and attitude as I raced to follow Cecilia.

“All right! I’ve caught up!”

“Oh? And here I thought you simply wanted a closer view of my behind.”

“Wha— No, it’s not like that!”

“Ahaha, I was only kidding.” Cecilia was in a good mood for some reason, and we kept up the friendly chatter as we reached the top of the tower and turned around. After that, we raced back to the arena side by side.

“That’s it. Excellent job, both of you!” Ms. Yamada praised us with a smile on her face.

I wondered if it was really so pleasing to have one’s students do well, as I watched her breasts bounce up and down in counter-time to her joyful hop. *Ugh, I never know quite where I should be looking when talking to her...*

“Hey, Ichika! Hey!”

“What, Laura?”

“So you... You’re... You’re one of those breast men, too?”

“What? No, I mean, uh, I’m not thinking anything I shouldn’t!”

“Hmph! Really then. I... I guess it’s okay then...”

“O-Okay...?”

“Wh-Whatever! Ugh, don’t even look at me!” Laura, her IS already deployed, swept an arm in my direction. With the motion, her AIC activated, twisting my neck at a strange angle and holding it there.

Hey, wait a minute, you’re the one who talked to me in the first place!

Meanwhile, Chifuyu drew the class’s attention with a clap. “Listen up. We’re making an exception this year to allow the first years to participate in Cannonball Fast, but I don’t just want you to show up, I want you to achieve something, too. The lessons this teaches you are probably going to do you a lot of good in the future. I want you all to form up into groups and get suited up, double time. Get moving!”

The Cannonball Fast race was run every year, but usually it was only open to second years and up who had already been assigned ground crews. But with so much happening this year, and so many first years having their own personal IS, it was opened to all classes. It seemed like, since the groups using training IS were going to be class-by-class team efforts, there would be prizes like usual.

“All right, we’re gonna win!”

“Maybe I can make her finally notice me!”

“I want those free desserts! Gotta take this seriously!”

The enthusiasm of the girls may have been infectious, as even the teachers were fired up. Ms. Yamada, in her usual V-neck IS suit, seemed to be especially into it.

I bet she wears it like that because it just wouldn’t fit over her breasts otherwise... Honestly, thinking about it was just too much for a 15 year old... Especially since she was walking right up to me.

“Orimura, you really did well out there. That was amazing, especially for your first time using that visor!”

“T-Thanks.”

With my IS deployed, I had an even higher angle on her than usual. Even if I tried to look at her face, I’d be staring straight down her top, so I let my gaze wander as I scratched at my burning cheek.

“Orimura? Ah...” I’d noticed often that once Ms. Yamada got focused on something, she had a hard time noticing anything else. It was only now that she noticed where I was looking, and folded her arms to cover her chest while turning to the side.

“U-Um, would it be better if I purchased a new IS suit?”

“W-Why?”

“It seems like you have a hard time paying attention in class while I’m in this one...”

“Ahh...”

“But it would have to be a special order, wouldn’t it... I just got this one this year and had it altered, too, so it would be such a waste...” Her words tumbled out. For some reason, her embarrassment just made her even more appealing.

As we stood there awkwardly, Chifuyu approached us.

“Orimura.”

“Yes?”

Smack. A chop to my neck. It hurt. A lot. A wave of déjà vu washed over me in an instant.

“Show some shame for once. You shouldn’t look at your teacher like that.”

“Wait, no, I wasn’t—”

“If you’re not going to be using auxiliary thrusters, you should have a talk with Shinonono over there about allocating energy output. Understood?”

“Understood...”

My sister was so, so considerate. Considerate enough to make me cry. I did as I was told and flew toward Houki. With my IS deployed, I didn’t need to walk. It was so convenient.

“Heeeeeey, Houki.”

No response. Houki, who seemed like she was having a really hard time with energy allocation, was frowning at a projection display. I turned up my volume and called out to her again.

“C’mom, Houki! Hey!”

“W-What?!”

“Ms. Orimura said that since neither of us are using bolt-ons, we should have a talk.”

“Oh, I see! Sorry to dump this on you, Ichika, but take a look at this.” Houki brightened up at the arrival of help, and moved beside me to show me her display. It seemed like she didn’t have enough energy with her variable-sweep armor active.

“It’s nice having a big thruster for acceleration in Byakushiki, but I’m really impressed by how Akatsubaki can do a bit of everything. All you have to do is sweep your back and leg armor into high-mobility mode.”

“But if I don’t have enough energy, it doesn’t do me any good. I swear, her designs are always like this...”

Houki’s face always twisted into a frown when Tabane came up. And I always wondered why they couldn’t just get along. After all, they were sisters.

“What about Kenran Butou?”

“I... I still can’t use that.”

“Oh? I mean, you’d know better than I would, but it seems to me

like Akatsubaki is designed to use it as a primary energy source.”

The one-off ability of Houki’s IS, the Akatsubaki, was called Kenran Butou. It was capable of amplifying energy. So it should come in handy when the variable-sweep armor was engaged and eating up so much power... Or at least, that’s what I thought. And what Akatsubaki gained from this reliance on multiple energy sources was use of variable-sweep armor which, like BT weaponry, was excellently suited for offense, defense, or even mobility. But without a reliable energy supply from Kenran Butou, it would quickly run out. Pretty similar to my own Byakushiki, honestly.

“How about leaving your leg armor unswept, and only using your back? Use your standard thrusters for balance control.”

“I’d thought of that, but that reduces the thrust output too far. I’ve also considered not using the variable-sweep armor at all, but...”

“You’d never win the race that way.”

“Right... Ugh.” Houki hated losing, so it was only natural that she had her eyes on first place. I hated to lose, too, so I could really understand how she felt. “Ichika, how are you setting yours up?”

“Me? I’ve got Yukihiro Nigata turned completely off, and all energy going to my thrusters.”

“All of it? What if you’re attacked?”

“Then I’ll just dodge.”

“What if you have to attack?”

“There’s always ramming as an option.”

It made plenty of sense to me as the only option which covered all the bases, but when Houki heard it she broke out laughing.

“Ahahah. Cannon to the right of you, cannon to the left of you indeed.”

“Ugh... You know, I thought really hard about it too.”

“Hahaha. It’s, uh, definitely very you. Maybe... I should do some more thinking, too. Thank you, Ichika.”

“No problem. We’ll see who wins.”

“We sure will.”

“Anyway, see you later.”

“Yeah.”

Leaving Houki, I went over to Charl and Laura, part of the group using auxiliary thrusters. Speaking of which, here’s how it sorted out:

High-mobility package: Cecilia, Rin.

Mobility tuning: me, Houki.

Auxiliary thrusters: Charl, Laura.

Rin seemed really confident. “My new package is even better than I expected. You’ll see when I blow by you on race day.” I thought back to Rin, her arms folded, smugly announcing her superiority. It must be nice to have a package. I wish I had one too. But Byakushiki wasn’t

having any of it. Even Kuramochi Engineering, who had created it, had given up on developing add-on gear. So it was kind of a lost cause.

If I ever really needed some, I'd probably have to go to Tabane. *I wonder where she disappeared to? Tabane had vanished after the Gospel Incident in summer. I'm sure she was making trouble somewhere out there. Sigh...*

"Hey, Ichika!" Charl noticed me and waved me over. I waved back, and dematerialized my IS as I landed near her and Laura.

"How are you two doing?"

"We've both just finished installing our auxiliary thrusters. Next up is tuning them, right?"

"Correct."

Now that she mentioned it, I noticed they were both in IS suits with only their headgear deployed. Charl's looked like a hairband, while Laura's manifested as bunny ears. They almost seemed more like a pair of cute cosplayers. Each set seemed to be loading the newly-installed data, as they occasionally waggled. It made the pair look even more like adorable animals.



“Can I take a look?”

“Huh? Of course. Laura, why don’t we do a lap? I’ll send you the video feed. Tune to channel 304.”

“Oh, thanks. It’s really great to be able to watch someone better than me. I’m glad IS can do this.”

With Direct View, every bit of visual information—that is, everything that Charl saw—could be sent directly to my IS. It’s kinda like TV, or a stream.

“I’ll send from my perspective as well. Channel 305.”

“Thanks. But Laura, your target acquisition is so good that I have a hard time following your vision.”

“You idiot. Try harder to keep up.”

“I know, I know. Thank you for the lessons, Ms. Bodewig.”

“Hmph. So I’m your teacher now?” Laura’s blush betrayed that she was less frustrated with this arrangement than her words indicated. If anything, she was a little bit bashful.

All right, just gotta connect.

“Ichika, are you ready?”

“Yeah, I’m all set... It feels a little funny to see my own face on-screen, though.”

“Wha— I wasn’t just looking at you!”

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing.”

I watched Charl’s flustered hand-waving bemusedly as Laura materialized Schwarzer Regen and floated into the air.

“I’ll go first.”

“Hey, wait! Laura!”

One step behind, Charl deployed her own Rafale Revive Custom II. Both of them kept steady control over their IS as they flew through Arena Six’s course and toward Central Tower.

Huh... So that’s how I should be accelerating... Looking back and forth between the screens showing their view, I began to understand. They each had their own acceleration pattern, but their deceleration was so similar that I knew it would come in handy.

“How was that, Ichika?” A few moments later, Charl and Laura were back.

“Welcome back. That was really good. Both of you.”

“That was just the basics. We didn’t do anything unusual.”

“Wow, national cadets really are something. I’ll have to learn from that.”

“Mm. Hopefully you’ll be able to keep up.”

After having spoken to everyone else with their own IS—Rin was in Class B, so she wasn’t there—I went back to tuning my own IS.

“How’s it going, Orimura?”

“Oh, Ms. Yamada. I was really impressed with everyone else.”

“You need to do your best too. Cannonball Fast is a full-contact battle race, so it’s important to have a grasp on combat maneuver as well.”

“It’ll be tough with only one ranged attack, but I’ll try.”

“I know! It’s been a while, so why don’t we do a mock battle? At full speed, like Cannonball Fast would be.”

“Are you sure?” I was surprised by her sudden offer, but really grateful for the chance to get some prep in.

“Of course! My IS is already set up for high-speed combat, so we can start anytime.”

“Sure thing, then.”

“No problem!” With a broad smile, Ms. Yamada deployed her Rafale Revive. Unlike Charl’s Custom, hers was mostly similar to the base model. The biggest thing that made it stand out was the shield mounted on one arm.

“This shield can also be used as a side thruster. And I’m running three auxiliary thrusters on my back.” As she spoke, Ms. Yamada pointed out each part. Between the shield and the three beefy thrusters, her IS was definitely imposing.

“Wow, those are huge. Charl’s and Laura’s are nowhere near as big.”

“These auxiliary thrusters are adapted from orbital launch boosters. So they have to be so big, to hold the rocket fuel.”

“Rocket fuel?! Isn’t that dangerous?”

“It’s safe enough. Because of how they’re installed, the life support emergency defenses extend to cover them.”

“I see...” After five months at school, I was beginning to get a handle on IS. Thanks in no small part to Ms. Yamada’s special lessons.

“Then, shall we get started? Are you ready, Orimura?”

“Y-Yes.”

I called forth Byakushiki, and we crouched at the starting line.

“Then let’s begin! Three, two, one, go!”

“.....!”

My field of vision constricted in on itself. Then, suddenly, everything was as clear as day. This was my second time today at high speed, and I was starting to get used to it.

“You’re a fast learner, aren’t you. All right, I’m going to ascend now.”

“Okay!”

I followed Ms. Yamada as I replied over a private channel.

Why don’t I try out accelerating like Charl did? I slowed down ahead of the curve, then accelerated through it. *All right! Nailed it!* Keeping

my balance by manipulating my thrusters, I followed it up with an attempt at Laura's burst acceleration. Letting my speed fall naturally, I suddenly accelerated as I entered the banked curve, and was almost beside Ms. Yamada.

All right, I've caught— Suddenly, she reached an arm back toward me and fired a burst from her machine gun. *Dammit! I forgot this was going to involve combat!*

"Not bad, Orimura, but you've still got a lot to learn."

"Ugh!"

Rolling to the side, I dodged, only to meet a grenade with the pin pulled.

".....!!"

BOOM! The grenade exploded before my eyes. Caught up in the explosion, I flew off the course and sank to the ground.

"Ugh..." Crashing to earth was painful, even with the IS' shock absorption. As I stood up, Ms. Yamada hovered down next to me.

"Good job today, Orimura."

"You too."

She really was a former Japanese national cadet. I was no match for her practiced IS piloting. *It's hard to believe she's the same person who wiped out during entrance exams...* Without that burst of stage fright, I wouldn't have stood a chance.

"Can you stand?"

"Yeah. I think."

Using my thrusters, I pushed myself into the air before setting my feet on the ground.

"I'm going to go check on everyone else now."

"Of course. Thanks again."

"It was nothing." Ms. Yamada bowed politely, then left toward the struggling groups in trainer IS.

Guess I'd better go back over my tuning. I spent the remaining hour of the period poring over settings.



"Phew, that was exhausting..."

It was the day before Cannonball Fast, and I'd spent every possible minute in the arenas having Laura drill everything she could into me.

"The most important thing in high-speed combat is clear, cool thinking. The decisiveness to take action is next. Understood?"

"Split-second decision making between attack, evasion, and defense? I think I've gotten a lot better at that."

"You still have a long way to go. And you're still burning through far too much shield energy. If you simply evaded, you'd make it through without losing energy or speed."

"I see."

"Then, let's get to combat training!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

We went through a whole 'nother two hours of that... After I dragged my exhausted carcass back to my room, I made straight for the shower. The hot water washed away first my sweat, then my fatigue.

"Phew..." Getting out, I dressed, then dove backward into bed. I think I've pretty much got the hang of it, but it sure ain't coming easy.

Knock, knock.

"Hmm? Who is it?" I got up and walked to the door. Opening it with a click, I saw Laura.

"Oh? What's up?"

"Oh, it's just... I thought maybe we could go get dinner..." For once, Laura was a bit mumbly. She kept fidgeting, too, as if she couldn't calm down.

"Hmm? That's a cute outfit you've got on."

".....!!"

"I've never seen you in that before. What's the special occasion?"

Laura was wearing a one-piece dress, cut long. Its slender silhouette went well with her delicate build, and her silver-blond hair stood out against the black cloth. The rope belt slung casually around her waist caught my eye.

"This... This is just... It's something I bought when I was out shopping with Charlotte!"

"Huh. It looks good on you. Makes you look really classy."

"Cl-Class...?!"

"Anyway, let's go get something to eat."

"Classy... Classy..."

"Laura?"

"Oh, nothing! Anyway, about dinner! Let's get going!"

She nervously started walking, swinging her right arm at the same time as her right leg and vice-versa.

"What's up? Is something wrong?"

"Ugh! Quit bothering me about it!" She caught me in the ribs with a karate chop. *Why?* "This is all your fault!"

"Whoa! Hey, wait, stop it! ...Ugh, I give up!" I caught the hand delivering a flurry of blows, and swept out her legs with some basic aikido.

".....?!"

Laura's tiny form floated skyward. As it did, I plucked her from out of the air into my arms.

"Wh-Wh-What?!"

"Cool it, will ya?"

"Mm..."

Laura nodded meekly up at me from something almost like a princess carry. With her attacks stopped, I set off for the dining hall, still carrying her.

“Woooooow! Why’s she getting princess carried?!”

“Lucky Bodewig.”

“Me too! Do me next!”

“Grr! I can’t stand how perfect she looks like that!”

Dammit... As soon as I walked in, the girls there noticed. *Huh, I wonder why I didn’t run into anyone in the halls.* Well, there was no time to think about that. I needed to do something about the girls closing in on me.

“Hey, Laura, I’m putting you down now.”

“Oh. Y-Yeah...”

For some reason, she sounded a bit disappointed as I set her down. Now that I thought of it, she was light. Girls in general were pretty light.

“Orimura!”

“Ah, that’s not something I do on request.”

“Why?!”

“It’s no fair doing it just for Laura!”

“Yeah!”

Somehow, I managed to brush off their angry buzzing, and they went back to their seats. That alone ate up nearly five minutes of our dinner.

“Phew, I can’t say that doesn’t happen a lot but it’s still a pain.”

Laura quietly wrapped her arms around each other as if holding the places I’d touched her to herself, and her cheeks were a bright pink.

“What’re you having, Laura? I was thinking of the barley-rice pilaf with jellied yam.”

“.....”

“Hey, Laura. Laura?”

“W-What?!”

“What’re you having?”

“Oh, right! The fruit salad and a chocolate pu...”

“Chocolate?”

“N-No! Not that! I misspoke!”

“Oh, the chocolate pudding? That’s some good stuff.”

“.....”

“But unexpected. I didn’t think you liked that kind of thing.”

“Well, Charlotte shared some of hers with me earlier, and it was delicious, so...”

“Oh, I see. Well, if you want it, go ahead and have it.”

“Mm...”

With that, we each got our meals and took our seats.

By the way, the pilaf meal came with grilled tripe. The best part about it was the special wasabi sauce. How the tingling on my tongue was cooled by the jellied yam was one of my secret solaces.

“Are you sure that’s enough for you, Laura?”

“I-I’ve heard that it’s healthier to eat smaller dinners...”

“Oh, right. I’ve heard about that. But it’s not like you’re dieting or anything, so you don’t need to worry about it, right?” After all, you’re so skinny.”

“Sk-Skinny?!”

“Wait! Don’t get mad! It’s good to be skinny!”

“I... I suppose. Hmph...”

Laura turned back to her meal, obviously not quite in agreement. Watching her eat a salad in that dress was like watching some kind of commercial or chick flick. *It’s honestly a little bit entrancing...*

“Hm? Is there something on my face?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“I see.”

We went back to eating. After that, neither of us really had anything to say, not that that was out of the ordinary. As we ate, a silence sat in the air. Neither of us minded eating in silence like this, though. If anything, it was a moment of respite from how busy our lives at the Academy were.

“Ichika.”

“Yes?”

Laura spoke up. This was unusual for her. I stopped eating and looked up.

“Tomorrow will be here soon.

“Yeah, it’s Cannonball Fast time. We’ve gotta do our best.”

“I should tell you. I won’t lose.”

“For sure. Wouldn’t be any fun if you weren’t trying.”

With that, we continued on with our meals. Thinking of my first official battle, at high-speed no less, filled my heart with tension, but also with eagerness.



The day of Cannonball Fast. The stands were packed, and fireworks exploded in the sky.

“Great weather today, huh.”

Looking up at the clear autumn sky, I shielded my eyes from the sun. Today was kicking off with the second-years, then first years with their own IS, then a race between first years in trainers. Finally, there would be an exhibition race between the third years.

“There you are, Ichika. Hurry up and get ready.”

“Hey, Houki. I was just thinking about how many people are watching.”

“Yeah, it looks like lots of industry VIPs and government officials like usual. It’d be a big crowd with just the bodyguards.”

Even without them, the number of people watching illustrated just how much attention was being paid to IS. I wanted to make sure not to embarrass myself in front of so many people with my results.

Hey, I wonder where Ran is? Hmm... I remembered her seat number and looked in her direction. As I used Byakushiki to zoom in, I felt a pinch on my ear.

“Oww!”

“Hurry it up! You’re not a little kid anymore!”

“Then why are you treating me like one?!”

“If you don’t show up, the teachers are going to be mad!”

“I know! I got it! So let me go!”

“Hmph.”

That really hurt. I thought she was going to pull my ear off. But it wouldn’t do me any good to argue with her about it, so I headed off to the pits. *I hope Ran didn’t get lost. Nah, that isn’t like her.*



“Hmm, F-45, F-45...” Ran walked while looking down at the seating map.

Bump.

“Wha—”

“Oh?”

She must have bumped into someone while looking for her seat. Ran quickly, embarrassedly steadied herself and bowed slightly.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

The woman was older than her, with blonde hair and overflowing with allure. *Wow, she’s beautiful...*

The woman was in her late 20s. She was wearing a fabulous red suit that really showed that she was at her peak. Her fashionable sunglasses covered her eyes. Her voluptuous breasts and curvy hips, separated by a slender waist, were the type to draw the eye of men and women alike. Silently comparing herself with the woman, Ran shrank into herself as she came up short even in her own mind.

“Are you hurt?”

“No. Sorry again.”

“That’s good, at least. But do try to be more careful of where you’re walking.”

“Yes.”

The blonde woman waved and passed by Ran. As she did, her

golden earrings glimmered in the light. *This is an IS event. So there must be people here from all over the world.* As she thought, Ran reflexively looked down at her own chest. *I'm still growing. I don't need to worry... Yet.*

Ten minutes later, having made her way to her seat, Ran's pulse was pounding in anticipation. *I'm going to get to see Ichika in his IS!* And then there was his birthday party later. Ran was normally a quiet, calm student council president, but right now she was like a little kid waiting for the circus to begin.



We could hear the astonishment of the crowd all the way in the pits. The second years were racing now. It seemed like a closely-fought dead heat, where the winner could be anyone.

"Hey, this Sarah Welkin girl is a British National Cadet, right?"

"Indeed. She hasn't her own IS, but she is quite talented. She's taught me a few things, in fact," chimed in Cecilia, who had already deployed her IS Blue Tears with its Strike Gunner high-mobility package.

She's really getting into this. I've gotta take it seriously, too. I deployed Byakushiki and started getting ready. With us waiting in the pits were the other racers Houki, Rin, Laura, and Charl.

"Wow, that thing's really beefy, Rin."

"Mhm. Looks great, doesn't it? It's got a top speed that can keep up with even Cecilia's."

The Feng high-mobility pack mounted four auxiliary thrusters, and came with added chest armor that thrust forward. I almost wondered if she was planning on checking us out of the way with it... The two impact cannon pointed out toward the side, probably less to shoot us down, and more to provide cover fire. *It really is specialized for Cannonball Fast.* Looking at it that way, she might have the advantage. Cecilia's package was built more for hit-and-run operations, and the rest of us had made do with what we could. Compared to that, Rin's purpose-built solution may put her a step ahead.

"Hmph. I'll show you that the weapon doesn't make the warrior." Houki's comment was appropriately badass. It seemed like she was covering for her energy issues with manual control of her variable-sweep armor.

"There's a flow to every battle. The one to master it will be the victor." Laura, with three auxiliary thrusters on her back, joined the conversation. They may not have been designed specifically for her, but she seemed pretty confident that the new model of thruster was enough to carry her to victory.

“Let’s all do our best.” Charl left it at that. Like Laura, she had three auxiliary thrusters, but hers were on each shoulder and her back. Charl’s IS had already been customized with two bespoke wing thrusters, but these would raise her peak output even more.

“Is everyone ready? It’s time to go to the starting line!” Ms. Yamada’s voice, sounding a little bit too relaxed, rang through the pits. We each nodded and followed the navigation to our marks. *Byakushiki’s in peak form today. I have to do my best too.*

“And now for the race between first-years with their own personal IS!” The announcer’s voice echoed through the stands. At our marks, we fired up our thrusters.

Fshhirrrrr...

Lowering my hypersensor visor, I focused. Under the eyes of the crowd, the starting signal lit.

3... 2..... 1..... Go!

“Mmf—” As I accelerated, the world blurred around me. The hypersensor’s vision support would kick in soon, but for a second, the speed made me lose my bearings. *Cecilia’s already getting out in front!* Through the first corner, Cecilia had already taken the lead.

“Smell you later, Ichika!” Rin suddenly pulled out to pass.

“Hey!”

“I’ve got you now, Cecilia!” Pulling alongside Cecilia, she fired her impact cannon. Cecilia rolled to the side to dodge. Meanwhile, Rin used her explosive acceleration to pull ahead.

“Ugh! Not bad at all!”

“Hehehe! You’re slow!”

“...How foolish.”

“.....?!”

Laura had been keeping up with Rin perfectly, and slipped ahead. It seemed like her plan was to slipstream behind other IS.

“Dammit!”

“Too slow!”

As Rin panicked and tried to aim her impact cannon, a tongue of flame stretched out from Laura’s revolver cannon. It wasn’t a direct hit, but the impact at speed was enough to send Rin flying off course. Meanwhile, she opened up cover fire, stretching back even to me and giving her even more of a lead.

“Ugh! I knew Laura was going to be trouble!” I sped up trying to keep close, but she gained distance in each corner.

“See you later, Ichika.”

“Even you, Charl?!”

“Timing is everything in Cannonball Fast. See you at the finish line.” Charl pushed her thrusters harder, closing in on Laura. I tried to focus on keeping up with her, but a red laser streaked past my eyes.

“That’s... Houki!”

“Sorry, but I’m passing you by!”

“Easier said than done!”

Akatsubaki’s katana, with both short and long-range attacks, shot red lasers at me. I extended Setsura’s claw and began to fire back.

“Not bad!”

“You’re not taking me down that easy!”

As we drew close in combat, Cecilia and Rin added their own attacks. **Blam!** An impact cannon shot strayed from the course and exploded against one of the retaining walls.

“It’s not over yet!”

“We’re just getting started!”

Just as we finished our first lap and the battle began to heat up, it happened.

Suddenly, an IS swooped down from the sky, firing at Laura and Charl.

“.....?!”

“That... That’s the Silent Zephyrus!”

Without even watching Laura and Charl as they spun off-course, the attacker’s mouth curled into a sneer.

Chapter IV: Heartbreaker

“EEEEK!” Someone screamed. Panic spread across the crowd before the race staff could figure out how to handle what had just happened.

“Calm down! Please calm down and evacuate quietly!” The announcement boomed over the stands, but no one was listening.

“Eek!” Ran was knocked off balance by someone’s arms. Just as she was about to tumble over, a gentle hand stopped her.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes...”

The hand was Tatenashi’s. This was the second time that day that an older beauty had made Ran’s heart pound. *She’s so cool...*

“What a mess. We’d better stay off the streets until things calm down. Follow me.”

“O-Okay.” Automatically taking Tatenashi’s hand, Ran followed. Opening a door marked ‘Staff Only,’ Tatenashi pulled Ran into the room beyond.

“I’ve got a little something to take care of, so why don’t you wait here for now?”

“Um...”

“If anyone comes, tell them the student council president said it was okay to be here.”

“Student council president...”

They were both student council presidents, but the difference between them was like day and night, and it ate at Ran inside.

“Anyway—”

Even the pose she struck while pointing was cool. Ran was left stunned for a few moments after Tatenashi left.

Wait, Ichika! Ran thought back to when the attacker had fired on Ichika. *I hope he’s okay...* Clutching her hands, she hoped—almost prayed—that Ichika was safe.



“Are you okay? Laura! Charl!” I rushed to where they had crashed into a wall and deployed Setsura’s energy shield. A moment later, a hail of BT rifle fire crashed into it.

“Ugh...”

“Ichika! That IS... I...!”

“Cecilia?! Hey, wait!”

“That’s the second BT IS, Silent Zephyrus! This time! This time, I...!”

Even though I tried to stop her, Cecilia set off alone after the attacker—the Silent Zephyrus. But with her high-mobility package installed, her bits couldn’t fire at all. She still had her BT rifle, but it was tuned down. That wouldn’t do her much good.

“Ichika! You’ve got the backline!”

As Cecilia made a B-line for the Silent Zephyrus, Rin rushed to provide backup. Cecilia’s beam shots, and Rin’s impact cannon fire, streaked toward the target.

“You’re not getting away!”

“Go!”

The Silent Zephyrus, rather than trying to evade, simply grinned cheekily. A moment before the attack hit, it opened a beam parasol.

“Wha—”

“Ugh! I knew it, its shield bits... Rin! We’ll go for a pincer attack!”

“Don’t tell me what to do! I’ll try it, just...”

Cecilia and Rin fired from different sides. As if choreographed, the Silent Zephyrus suddenly soared into the sky.

“That’s the IS which was captured from England...”

“Laura! Can you move?”

“Not enough to be useful in combat. I can barely manage fire support.” As Laura spoke, she pushed herself up and began to fire at the Silent Zephyrus. However, it dodged nimbly, almost as if to show off its absolute superiority by the numbers.

“Ugh!”

Even as it fought off Cecilia and Rin, the Silent Zephyrus danced through the air.

“Ichika! Leave her to me! Join up with Houki and help Cecilia!”

“Charl! Damage report!”

“My thrusters are dead. I can get up in the air with PIC, but there’s no way I can take that thing on.” As she spoke, Charl purged her auxiliary thrusters. Wreckage like that would probably never see the open sky again. “I’ll cover Laura while she fires. Get out there, Ichika!”

“Got it!”

Leaving it to Charl to keep Laura safe, I flew off after the Silent Zephyrus. Partway, I met up with Houki, and we looked for an opportunity to close into melee range with a coordinated attack.

“Take... THIS!”

The Silent Zephyrus responded with quick slashes from the bayonet on its rifle. As I attacked with Yukihiro Nigata in my right hand and Setsura, its claw in blade mode, in my left, the Zephyrus’s shield bits swooped in with perfect timing, and I was unable to land a

blow.

“What are you even after, Phantom Task?!”

“...This is a farce.”

“What?!”

As it parried Yukihiro Nigata, it swung a fierce kick at me.

“Ugh!”

“Ichika!” Houki barely shoved me out of the way of a close-range shot. But then the Silent Zephyrus made use of its BT Flexible Fire. The beam twisted toward me, following me.

“Aaaargh!” I barely managed to block it with Setsura in shield mode, but my back crashed into the wall. “Ugh!”

I’d made a fatal mistake, and the Silent Zephyrus leapt at its opportunity.

“Die...”

Its rifle split in two at the center and aimed a fully-charged shot. As its energy crackled in the air, it let loose—



“M’s doing excellent work holding off so many personal IS.”

She squinted through her sunglasses as she watched the attacker—M. On closer examination, she was the woman who had run into Ran earlier.

“But she’s still not pushing herself. I wish she’d try a little harder.”

Someone called out to the woman as she sighed, “Isn’t that a bit cruel? It’s not like she had the choice to participate or not.”

The woman didn’t turn. She could tell from the voice who it was. Sarashiki Tatenashi. IS Academy student council president. A woman who, even as a high school student, could make a place for herself anywhere in the world with her genius talent. Currently a Russian pilot. Not a cadet, a full pilot.

“Your IS—which one was it, the Gustoi Tuman Moskva?” the woman asked.

“That’s its old name. It’s the Mysterious Lady now.”

“Oh.” The woman turned, tossing a glimmering knife in the blink of an eye.

“I dislike women with poor manners.”

Immediately deploying her IS, Tatenashi batted the knife away with her Rusty Nail chain sword. Continuing on in one motion, she swung it at the woman like a whip.

“Why, isn’t that a rude way to treat someone you’ve just met?” Casting off her sunglasses, the woman caught it with the gauntlet of her own IS.



“Whatever are you after, Phantom Task?”

“Whyever would I tell you? Especially with a setup as good as this.”

“I insist.”

“Oh, but can you? Sarashiki Tatenashi.”

“I will, Squall.” Tatenashi dropped her chain sword and took up her lance. The four gatling guns mounted inside it roared to life, firing a coordinated burst. ***Rat-a-tat-tat!***

Tatenashi’s aim was true, but there wasn’t a shade of relief on her face. A golden cocoon enveloped Squall, and not a single round struck true.

“Shall we stop this?”

“.....”

“Your IS can’t break through mine. You understand this, right?”

“If you can’t win—if you can’t defeat your foe—there’s no reason to fight. That may be the wise decision... But—” Tatenashi’s veil of water formed into a blade and moved to attack. “I’m Sarashiki Tatenashi. I’m the IS Academy’s student council president. I need to live up to expectations!”

Swiftly dodging a thrust from a drill formed of water, Squall threw another knife and bellowed, “You’ll need more than that!”

A water blade slashed the knife out of the air. But as it made contact, the knife exploded.

“.....?!” The air was filled with a thick black smoke. Of course, it wasn’t enough to block an IS’ vision, but through her hypersensor, Tatenashi saw Squall turn tail and flee. “Ugh... That’s the second time she’s gotten away...”

Tatenashi was a fierce foe in a head-on fight. But if her opponent chose to flee, all she could do was watch them make their escape. No one was perfect.

Sigh... I haven’t done anything to be proud of at all lately. I guess I have no right to make fun of Ichika. Tatenashi stood, regret in place of her usual playfulness.



“Eeeeeek!”

“Rin?!” Rin was sent flying by the full-power BT rifle blast. “You idiot! Why did you cover me... Hey! Rin!”

“Quit complaining... It’s because... You’re so slow... *Cough...*”

“Rin!”

Rin, who had taken the shot for me, passed out as she tried to sling a punch at me. Her IS’ life support systems must have kicked into full life support mode and put her into an induced coma as it received

near-fatal damage. I'd been through that summer, and it was pretty intense.

"Dammit!" Just as I pushed myself to my feet, Setsura's energy ran dry. The Silent Zephyrus trained its rifle on me again, and this time I was without a shield.

"I won't let that happen!"

Before it could unleash its shot, Cecilia pushed herself between me and the Zephyrus. Not to cover me, but for a ramming attack with all of the high-mobility package's power.

"Cecilia!"

"Get energy from Houki! Now! I'll buy you time!" Cecilia grappled with the Zephyrus as if to pin its arms down, and drove it into the arena's barrier wall. She fired her thrusters, slamming it into the barrier over and over, until on the fourth blow it finally cracked.

"Damn you..."

"I'll show you the power of BT Unit 01, Blue Tears!"

Two blue IS flew through the crack in the barrier. Gaining speed, they soared toward the city.

"Ugh! Hold on, Cecilia!" Houki flew toward me, and as I took her hand energy began to flow into my IS. "Please, Houki! Activate Kenran Butou!"

"That... That's not something I can just use whenever..."

"Please, just figure it out somehow! Cecilia can't hold back that thing alone!"

I shook her arm in frustration. But she answered with a firm nod, as if that was enough to show her how dire the situation was.

"Understood. I'll try." Houki touched my shoulder. I kneeled instinctively, my head drooping.

"All right! Please!"

"I feel the same as back then... I..." Houki closed her eyes to focus. "I... want to fight alongside Ichika. I want to give him strength!"

Vrrrr...

"Answer me, Akatsubaki! HAAA!" At that moment, I felt a flow of warmth from Houki's hand. "It... It worked, Ichika! Kenran Butou activated!"

"Ah! Thanks, Houki!"

"I... It's... If it gave you strength, that's good enough."

"All right, I'll leave this to you. Give Rin some energy too."

"Got it. Hurry up and catch up to Cecilia."

"Yeah!" As I answered, I fired up my thrusters to full power. "I'm coming, Cecilia!"



Ugh! She's tough! As she raced to keep pace, Cecilia trained her

long high-output BT rifle Blue Pierce on the Silent Zephyrus. But, as if reading her timing, the shield bits always flew in the way or the Zephyrus always drew away at just the right time.

Meanwhile, M quietly, almost indifferently, continued her hail of attacks on Cecilia, who had a hard time with the precise, fast, and most importantly unpredictable Flexible Fire shots.

At this rate, one of them's going to catch me eventually. So if it's come to this...! Cecilia summoned her close-combat blade, Interceptor, into a tight grip, and charged in at the Silent Zephyrus.

"I've got you now!"

"Hmph."

M, as if discovering a new game to play, summoned a knife into her own left hand and closed into melee with Cecilia. **Clang!** The blades clashed with a shower of sparks.

"Ugh...!"

Melee combat at supersonic speeds took a huge toll on the mind. But Cecilia, obstinate to the end, fought on. **Clang! Clang! Ching!** As she fought one-handedly, M daringly braked. Cecilia, still in hot pursuit, saw her vision suddenly fill with a highway overpass.

"Damn you!"

An Earley roll pulled her out of danger, and her rage overflowed at M's taunting grin. *Is she playing with me?!* Again, Cecilia swung downward with her blade. But M sent it flying in a flash.

".....?!"

"...Die already," came a voice cold enough to chill one's blood. Immediately after came a cruel volley of fire which washed over Cecilia.

"AHH!" Her shield energy worn away, the rifle in her left hand exploded. Somehow, she managed to quickly climb just before crashing into the ground.

"It's over."

The bayonet on the Zephyrus's rifle glowed blue.

"No... Not yet. I still have one last trick!" Screaming, Cecilia pulled the trigger in her heart. The high-mobility package, Strike Gunner. There was one forbidden tactic, one thing she'd been told never to use with every bit dedicated to increased thrust.

"LET'S GO! BLUE TEARS FULL BURST!"

A hail of fire burst out from the covered barrels. Four cannons fired, blowing the skin above off. If worst came to worst, her IS would come apart in the air. But without Flexible Fire, this was the strongest attack she had for life-or-death moments.

"Is that all you have? Don't make me laugh!" M's voice cracked. Laughing, she rolled, evading each shot.

"Wh—?!"

“Die.”

With a sickening sqwunch, her bayonet pierced both of Cecilia’s arms.

“AHHHHHH!” The sudden, intense pain made her cry out. Hearing Cecilia’s screams, M’s mouth twisted cruelly.

“...Please, Blue Tears...” Cecilia’s hands, no longer able to grip, reached out toward M. Inside her heart, blue drops fell, rippling on the surface of a pool. *Ah, that’s right. Blue Tears means...*

“.....?”

M watched, unsure of Cecilia’s plan. And a slow smile spread over Cecilia’s face.

“Bang.”

Her hand formed into a pistol. No bullet would ever leave her finger. But in the next moment, four beams tore through M’s back.



“.....?!”

Flexible Fire, only available with BT energy at full utilization. In her final moments, Cecilia had finally made it her own, but now her IS, having lost thrust and balance at supersonic speed, could no longer hold itself together.

This must be it for me... But at least I gave as good as I got. Her face showed perfect peace, but just as she resigned herself to her fate, she heard a voice.

“Kept you waiting, huh?”

Byakushiki soared in, cleaving the Silent Zephyrus’s rifle in half as it wrapped Cecilia in its arms.



“Cecilia! Just hang on!”

“Why, Ichika... You’re late...”

“Sorry!”

“Whatever shall we do about this? You’ll... You’ll have to make it up to me with... With a date...”

“A da— Hey, Cecilia! Cecilia!” As I shouted out to Cecilia, her vital signs came up on my hypersensor. Thankfully, she was just unconscious. *Jeez, you really pushed yourself too hard...* I found a building that would hold us up, and made landfall.

Looks like her IS has stopped the bleeding from her arms... But I’ve still gotta get her medical attention, or who knows what’ll happen. IS Academy had medical facilities comparable to a research hospital. I decided to bring her there for now.

“Ah...!” I was just about to lift off again when the hair on the back of my neck stood up. Silent Zephyrus floated there, the sun at its back, looking down at us. Its gaze was every bit as chilling as a knife held to my throat. “Damn you...”

I glared up at the pilot who had hurt Cecilia so badly. Her visor covered her face, but I could still sense her hostility. *What do I do? Can I fight her while keeping Cecilia safe?* Probably not. But I had to at least try. It was the only way I could protect everyone. Gritting my teeth, I clenched Yukihiro Nigata’s hilt.

“What, Squall? ...Wilco. Bugging out.”

“What...?”

“Hmph...” The Silent Zephyrus shot me a glare, then turned and retreated.

“What the heck was that thing doing?”

Still feeling the pressure of its malevolence even after it left, I hesitated for a moment.

◆

“All together, now!”

“Happy birthday, Ichika!”

At Charl’s signal, a volley of party poppers fired.

“Yeah, thanks.”

The time was 7:30 at night, the place was the Orimura residence...
So far, so good. But...

“Wow, it’s packed in here.”

Let’s list the participants. There were the usual suspects. Houki, Cecilia, Rin, and Charl. Then there was Ran. For guys, there were my friends Gotanda Dan and Mitarai Kazuma. And as for other students, Tatenashi, Miss Casual, and Utsuho. Then, for some reason, Mayuzumi Kaoruko, the newspaper club’s most active member, had shown up too. My living room wasn’t especially big, so it was packed nearly to bursting.

Phew... I can’t believe everyone’s partying this hard after what just happened. No, if anything, it made sense. We all needed something to pick us up after that.

Things had settled down for now, but we still weren’t sure what Phantom Task was even after. But seeing Academy staff like Chifuyu and Ms. Yamada on edge as they responded made it clear that this was serious business. *Especially since we brought our IS into urban combat...* They kept me for a thorough debriefing, and I didn’t make it out until after four.

“So, um, Ichika! I made you a cake!”

“Ooh, thanks, Ran. Hey, how was today? Have fun? I mean, I know it was kind of a mess, but.”

“Of course! You looked great! Here’s your cake!”

“Thanks.”

I took the plate she offered me and began to eat the slice of cake that was on it. It was a cocoa sponge cake, with whipped cream and chocolate. The soft, fluffy whipped cream spread a gentle sweetness through my mouth as I chewed.

“This is really good. Did you make it all by yourself?”

“Y-Yes!”

“You’re good at cooking. I’m sure you’re gonna make a great wife someday.”

“A... A wife?!”

“Here’s some ramen, Ichika.”

“Wow! Where were you hiding that, Rin?”

“Just finished it. Dig in while it’s still hot. I made the noodles myself.” Rin puffed out her chest proudly. The wavy noodles floating in the golden broth definitely looked delicious. Did she make the char

siu herself too? That must've been a lot of work.

"C'mon, Ling..."

"Hmm? Oh, is that you, Ran? You've gotten so much taller!"

"Funny you should notice that."

Rin and Ran were already going at it like two cats. I wonder why they couldn't get along. They've been like this since middle school. At one point I almost asked what their beef was, but really, I got the feeling that that would be poking the hornet's nest.

"Thanks, then!" I slurped up the ramen. The broth was a seafood dashi base with a refreshing aftertaste. Al dente noodles sprang back as I chewed. The more I chewed, the more my mouth filled with that relaxing blend.

"Wow. This is good. You're getting even better at cooking, aren't you?"

"I guess! I may be a national cadet, but I've still got to learn what I'll be doing as a bride too."

"I see. That makes sense."

"C'mon... play along a little..."

"Eh?"

"Oh, nothing!" I wondered what she was mad about. Anyway, I set the bowl down and headed toward the kitchen.

"Cecilia?"

"Yes?"

Cecilia sat there, her right arm wrapped in bandages. Her wounds definitely weren't light, but a week or so of applied regenerative therapy would likely have her back in action. They had wanted to keep her overnight in the hospital, but she fervently insisted on coming to my birthday party.

"Are you feeling okay? If it hurts too much, you can always go rest."

"Why, of course! I was barely scratched! More importantly, though."

"Hm?"

"Happy birthday, Ichika. Here, I bought this for you."

"What's in here?"

"Why, a present, of course! Open it up!"

"Sure."



I picked through the careful wrapping and opened the box.

“Ooh, a tea set.”

“Ahem! This is an Aynsley set, of the sort used by the royal family. I’ve also included some of my favorite black tea.”

“Wow, this is incredible. Thanks a lot. I’ll be sure to take good care of it.”

“It’s the least I could do. More importantly, perhaps we could—”

“I-chi-ka, are you eating well?”

“T-Tatenashi?! Don’t hug me from behind like that.”

“Why not? It’s not hurting anything!”

“Yes it is! It’s hurting my pure heart!”

“Oh my. Well, maybe I can heal that scarred heart, then.”

“Umm.”

While we talked, Tatenashi was pressing her breasts into my back.

“Hey! President Sarashiki!” Cecilia couldn’t keep her voice from cracking. She was trying to split the two of us apart, but Tatenashi had latched onto me like a barnacle. “Let go of him!”

“Call me Tatenashi, please.”

“Who even cares?! Just let go of Ichi— Ow!”

“C’mon, don’t be silly. Cecilia, your need to take it easy while your arm heals. Are you okay?”

“I am perfectly fi— No! I most certainly am not. Ichika!”

“Jeez, make up your mind.”

“Ahem. Since my arm is injured, could you feed me some cake.”

“Sure, fine.” I took another slice of cake and got Cecilia ready.

“Open wide.”

“Ahh...”

“Whoa! What are you doing, Cecilia! This is Ichika’s party!”

Dammit, Charl had found us.

Cecilia closed her eyes and sighed in bliss as she took a bite, “Ahh, what luxury.”

“I-Ichika! That’s no fair! Hey, wait, what are you up to, Tatenashi?! Ugh, I give up!” Charl spun between worries. She always ended up with the short straw, didn’t she...

“Oh my. Shall we move on, then?”

“Of course. I’m quite satisfied. Ahh...”

The duo, seeming quite pleased with themselves, left for the living room. While I was left alone with Charl in the kitchen, I took the opportunity to open her present.

“Thanks. I’m sure I’ll get a lot of use out of this.”

“Oh, of course! I hope it works well for you!”

The white gold wristwatch was loaded with features. It could show humidity, precipitation, weather, and even the news. Clicking

the crown in popped up a projection display. It used the newest vacuum cell batteries, and could charge via solar panel or body heat. It really was amazing.

“Charl, you have to tell me when your birthday is, so I can get you something just as nice.”

“Mm. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Today sure was a mess, wasn’t it. I wonder what she was after.”

“...You don’t have to always be super-serious with me.”

“Eh?”

“Oh, nothing!” Charl waved her hands. After clearing her throat, she spoke again, “I knew they were an international terrorist organization, but them having IS makes it even worse. Even a single IS can put them on an even footing with an entire national army if used right. At least they haven’t found a workaround for the limit on how much weaponry it can have installed, though.”

“I see...”

“It seems like the Academy’s keeping tabs on the situation, though, so I guess we can relax for now.”

“I sure hope so.”

I thought of the attacker today. Even though her face was covered by her visor, I could tell just how much she loathed me. Just the thought of it bothered me a bit.

“C’mon, don’t frown like that.”

“Eh? Was I?”

“Yeah. If you worry too much, you’ll never find happiness. Smile a bit.”

“Y-Yeah.” Charl reached up and pushed her own lips into a grin. Seeing that incredible smile lifted my own heart. “Oh, right. Laura said to tell you to go into the garden later.”

“Hmm? I guess I will now.”

“Sure. See you in a little bit, Ichika.”

Leaving Charl, I walked through the living room and outside.

“You’re late!”

“Ugh, sorry.”

“Well, um, I mean... It was my choice to wait for you anyway. I take that back.”

“Huh.”

It wasn’t like Laura to take things back after she said them. Though I rather liked her directness and inflexibility.

“I-I-Ichika!”

“Hmm? Whoa!”

Suddenly, she thrust a knife straight at my throat. I leapt backwards, only later noticing that she’d pulled the thrust before it would have hit. *I thought she was going to kill me!*

“You can have this knife!”

“...Eh?”

“For your birthday present! I’ve used it in combat. It’s sharp, and it’s durable. Take it!”

“Sure!”

I took the knife from Laura’s hand, and she gave me its sheath as well. The blade was over 20 centimeters long, and it was the kind of military-issue gear that wouldn’t have looked out of place ominously menacing on a black metal album cover. It was definitely a tool for killing.

“Ah...”

“W-What?!”

“This has a really nice grip.”

“I see. The sheath’s good too. See?”

“Thanks.”

The sheath had a loop for hanging from my belt. With it at my side, I could swing it into action with the slightest motion.

“You should understand what it means when a warrior gives you her weapon...”

“Huh? What?”

“N-Nothing! Anyway, we’re done here! I’m leaving!”

“Hey, wait.”

“W-What?!”

“Thank you, Laura.”

“.....!!”

I don’t know whether it was from surprise or bashfulness, but either way, Laura’s face turned red all the way up to her ears as she turned away with a “Hmph!” *What’s up with her today?*

“There you are, Ichika.”

“Oh, Houki. What’s up? Have enough to eat?”

“It’s your birthday, not mine. Or do you just think that I eat all the time?”

“I didn’t mean it like...”

“Relax, I was joking.” Houki chuckled to herself as I stood there confused. *Seems like she’s in a good mood today.*

“Here’s your birthday present.” Houki handed me a bag as she spoke. Inside was a large bundle wrapped in paper.

“What is it, Houki?”

“Open it.” I took the bag and opened up the paper wrapping. And... “Ooh? A kimono!”

“I found some good fabric at home, so I had it sewn.”

“Wow! I’ll have to try it on later! Thanks, Houki.”

“Mm. There’s a belt in there too, right?”

“Oh, yeah. It looks expensive.”

“Don’t worry about the price. Besides... It matches mine...”

“Yes?”

“You weren’t supposed to hear that!” Houki was suddenly very flustered. What was with her?

“I should wear it at the dorms sometime.”

“Mm. You have to show it to me when you do. Okay?!”

“Sure, sure. Still, a kimono. I was just thinking how I wanted one of those, too.”

It had a nice, sophisticated pattern. I could wear it around my room. It was always relaxing wearing a yukata when I went to hot springs.

“This kind of blows the present I got you out of the water, doesn’t it.”

“No, it’s fine. I really liked mine, too.” As she spoke, Houki poked at the ribbon holding her ponytail. It was the pale white one I’d gotten her on her birthday, July 7th.

“.....”

“You’ve kept on wearing it since then, haven’t you. I’m happy.”

“I-I mean, it’s not like I wear it every day!”

“I know, I know. But a couple times a week, right?”

“You... You pay a lot of attention to that.”

“I mean, it’s you.”

“Really... Because it’s me?”

Houki must have been happy about being noticed, as her cheeks turned red while she fidgeted her fingers. I knew how she normally was, so when she suddenly got all shy like this it made my heart pound.

“I-Ichika. Maybe later, we could...”

“Hey, there’s Dan and Utsuho. I wonder what they’re up to? I can’t quite hear them from here.”

“Ichika. It’s not right to eavesdrop.”

“C’mon, just a little.” I took Houki’s arm and pulled her closer to their corner of the living room.

“So we meet again,” Utsuho giggled awkwardly.

“Yeah, I guess...”

“.....”

“.....”

“Umm...”

Both tried to break the ice at once. Noticing the other start to talk, they each looked away.

“You go first.”

“No, you first.”

“.....”

“.....”

The silence continued. Both of them were blushing bright red.

“What are they doing?”

“Beats me. Probably trading contact info?”

“Yeah, like email addresses or something.”

“That’s enough. Let’s leave before they notice us.”

“Yeah.” As we made our way away, I noticed I was still gripping Houki’s hand. “Ah, sorry.”

“No, it... I don’t mind...”

“I see. Anyway, let’s get back to the party.”

“Yeah!”

Houki and I walked back over to the sofa. Rin was already there, with a board game set up for everyone. And just like that, the evening hours slipped away.

Epilogue: Reflection in Water

“Great. They’re not sold out yet.”

I was at the closest vending machine to my house. We’d run out of drinks, so I was there picking up ten or so cans. Charl was the first, though not the last, to argue that it was my party so I shouldn’t have to go, but honestly, since I’d done nothing so far I wanted to.

Let’s see. Tatenashi was coffee, Houki was green tea, Rin was oolong and Charl was orange juice, Laura wanted a sports drink, Cecilia black tea, and... I filled my arms with cans. *That should do it. Time to head back.*

Just as I turned to set off, I noticed a shadow standing back from the light of the machine. *Huh?* The machine was pretty far away from my place. Meaning, it couldn’t have been someone I knew.

As I took my second step, the shadow stepped into the light. It was a girl. A girl with a face I recognized. No, one I knew like the back of my hand.

“Chifuyu...?”

It was a girl of 15 or 16. But her face was the spitting image of Chifuyu at that age.



“No,” the girl opened her mouth. Her faint smile was like none I’d ever seen from Chifuyu. “I am you, Orimura Ichika.”

“What?!”

“Looks like I caused you a lot of trouble earlier.”

“Huh?! Wait, are you Silent Zephyrus’s—”

“Yes.” She stepped toward me.

“And your name is—”

“Orimura Madoka.”

Orimura... Madoka? It was a name I’d never heard. But her last name was the same as mine. And she looked exactly like Chifuyu.

“So I can be myself... I will take your life.”

A handgun gleamed dully in her fist.

Bang! The sound of a gunshot echoed out into the night sky.

Afterword: About Outlines

Hi, it's Yumizuru again. People ask me to go behind the scenes a lot on Twitter, so I want to get into that and go into what it's like to be in the industry.

The first thing you need when writing something you want to see published is an outline. Everyone has their own way to approach it, but for me, it's a short pitch, around a hundred words. If you can't hook someone on the concept while you're pitching it, you'll never get published. Your first reader is your editor, and you want them to love it.

Next up is crafting the characters. Flesh them out. It's when you run out of places to go with this that the initial drama appears. And that drama is what will drive the narrative.

Let's see, how about an example...

The devils and the angels are at war, and our young hero, a demon, is on the front line. There, he falls in love with a girl. But on her back are the white wings of an angel. An angel girl and a devil boy in love.

They resolve to elope, to the ends of the world if need be, but to get away from their pursuers, the boy makes a pact with an elder demon, while the girl takes up the forbidden sacred sword. Each is consumed by the power they rely upon. But they've sworn to stay with each other forever.

Can they make it away from the war? What awaits them after their escape? A love story between angel and devil, woven from hope and despair.

...See, that kind of thing. If you know you could make a book out of this, you've got the makings of a pro. Pick up your pen and get to work.

Now, as for how you write the romance, there are so many paths you can take. Is the angel older or younger? Expressive or quiet? It's like a kaleidoscope of possibilities that you can spin into limitless stories.

But if you put in too much, you'll never finish, so you need to have an ending in mind from the very beginning. That's a requirement. Once you've determined your ending, it's very easy to

create a story from the path to it.

For me, the thing that gives me my drive at the beginning is thinking “I’d like to see this ending!” But it doesn’t exist yet. I need to create it. And to do that, I need these characters, in this world, doing this. And there I go, I have a book.

I guess that isn’t really ‘behind the scenes,’ but... See you next time!

— Izuru Yumizuru

Subject

Celebration of Vol. 6 Release

Date

: Sunny with
guerrilla downpours

Time

: It's "today" until the
next morning show☐ Rough ☐ Cleanup☒ AfterwordCHOCO
MUGITANI KOICHI<http://chocolateshop-float.com>

IS suit headgear looks just like animal ears. Isn't it adorable?

Cat: "Meow! Mew-mew-mew!" ("Aww, c'mon, if you put it like that... ^//^")

Rabbit: "Bun-bun-bun." ("Hmph. How absurd.")

Fox: "Yip! Yip-yip!" ("I can't believe you! That's so embarrassing!")

Deer: "Deer-deer-deer." ("These are dragon horns!")

Ferret: "Fe-fe-fe-fe!" ("Deer don't even make that noise!")

Butterfly: "Butter!" ("...DIAF!")



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by Izuru Yumizuru

Translated by Mike Langwiser

Edited by Meiru

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